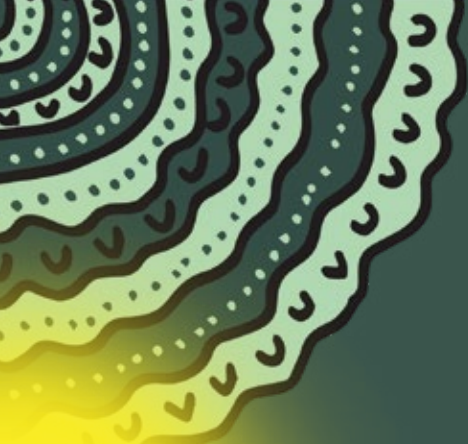




sync


UNSWeetened
Literary Journal



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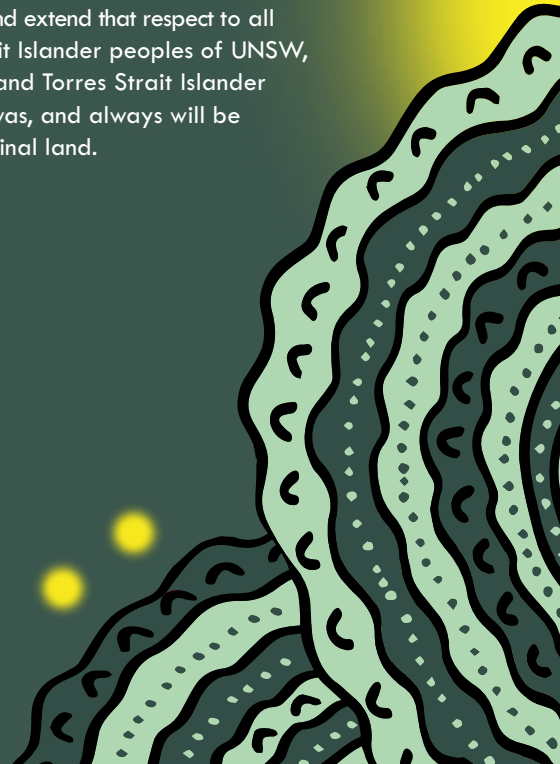
UNSW Student Life





UNSWeetened acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands of UNSW and all our places of home and study. We acknowledge the Bedegal people, the Darug people, the Gandagara people, the Ngunnuwal people, and the Gadigal and Wangal peoples of the Eora Nation.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of UNSW, and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander storytellers. This is, was, and always will be Aboriginal land.





Foreword

It's been two years since the pandemic first hit, and throughout this time, the community's dedication and passion for the journal has never failed to amaze me. It is thanks to every one of you that the journal persevered, and we emerged more vibrant as a community. UNSweetened has championed works of emerging writers for years, and I'm delighted to witness yet another year of beautiful writing and the support behind it.

I arrived at this year's theme, 'Sync', after reflection on the countless conversations I've had with people in recent times—losing our sense of time, existential crises, trying to stay connected with people when forces drive us apart; and how we try (despite it all) to lift ourselves up, keep our loved ones close, and live in the present. To me, 'Sync' serves as a reminder of our natural rhythms of falling in—and out-of-sync—it is a comfort knowing that life rises and falls like ocean tides and that beauty lies in the crests and dips of waves. My hope is that you may find comfort in experiencing this year's edition as well.

Working for UNSweetened continues to be a humbling experience. I am immensely grateful to and inspired by everyone who gave their time, energy, and gifts to this community, and I have loved seeing the community bond, creating memories of our own by sharing and telling stories that make us gasp, weep, and laugh together.

My warmest thanks to the authors who've generously shared their work with us; our sponsors and supporters, who've enabled and empowered us and the talent in our community; the 2022 volunteer team of editors, content curators, designers, publicists, and illustrators, whose company has meant the world to me and made this year's UNSweetened a rich, energetic, and wholesome one (I'm so proud of all of you!).

Thank you for shaping UNSweetened this year, and join us in celebrating

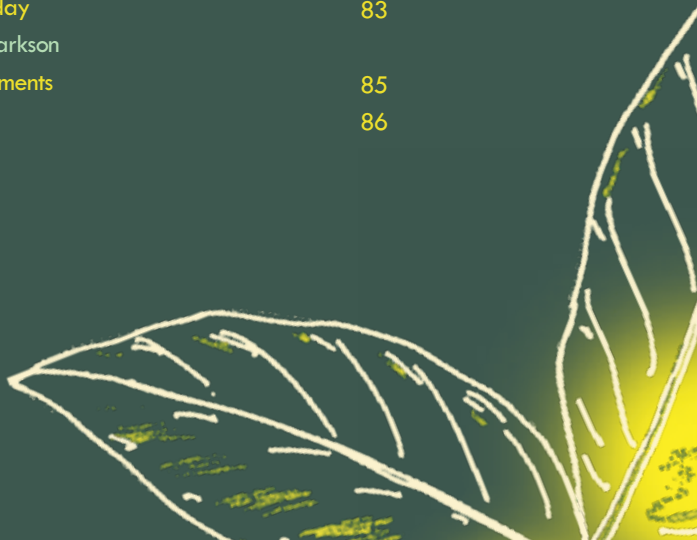
UNSweetened 2022: SYNC.

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Eve

Nicole Cadelina

A paper clay marquette or two,
an unpoped menthol in the corner closet,
a tender stone, a warted branch,
the dust blown off the black doves

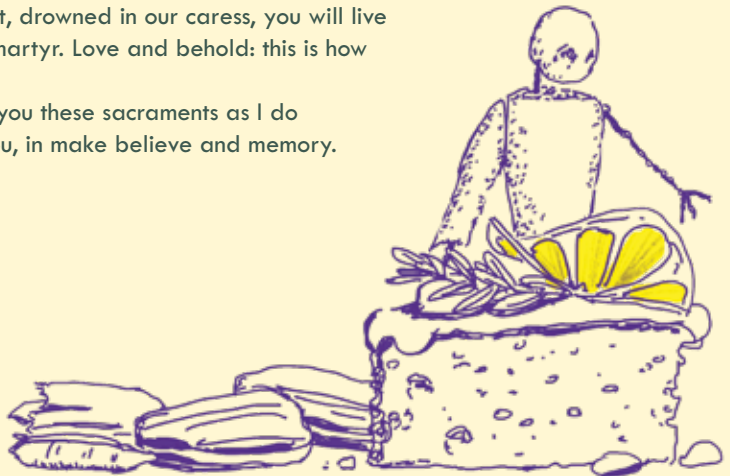
and their feathers; two rings, abandoned then,
adopted now when I collect you in cold kisses.
I will find you in all that I glean and love. For
now, I keep you here, in my mobile totem—

a lavender lyric

creased in cursive, rewritten in the serifs
you adorn as I chew on pitted dates. Now,
I must silhouette your presence when I
taste the malt and lemon cake in summer,

before we sleep beneath your blessed sins—
seedy wines that baptise you in slumber.
Dearest, drowned in our caress, you will live
like a martyr. Love and behold: this is how

I bear you these sacraments as I do
unto you, in make believe and memory.



Feed your head

Georgia Mitchell

We sit around the dinner table. Father, Mother Peter and Me/at all the news of the day we L(i.e.)ugh lol(lardy) corpses drinking up sweaty silence with spoons. Aren't we a pretty sigh/t-minus thre(e)at jokes before nuclear family explosion! Mother's legs are hidden safely inside her mouth shut wide, tucked away somewhere behind her back molar. Her shoelaces twice tied. Father's fingers are olive sunned. I've touched the soft skin on his / back once... / one summer he burned and blistered... I recall a memory of sinking cream, the first and last glimpse of a secret seam in his arm/our CRACK! "Peter's girlfriend is coming for..." / desert me, this desire to dive beneath the table and scurry away/ O creature / I could beat her out but / Peter Peter pumpkin / eat her quick before she leaves! They've heard us through the window, picked up their ears and dropped their eaves. Leave me be/cause we never speak. Of this, of that... young girl la(brat)dy will soon become so/up where Father's head towers over, his eyes warming our plates with shame, e.g. shell conversation all night but / No / one has not/iced tea has grown warm and Peter has grown cold. Memory waxing and waning like mould. Y(ears) on, did we ever kno(w)ck his pain? With one less player, we must continue the game. Louder face! LOUD e/race see who finishes first! I. Take one bite and throw myself up. The little piggy with an apple in her mouth. I (beg)in tears: slice me up and down the gu(lp)ilty as buttery onion waters my eyes. "We are guilt free if we finish our food" and clean our plates with our tongues. We cannot lose! We cannot lose. "Oh, and you simply must try the pork hun"/t!

Temporary

Melissa Ho

Fragments of the moon's glow pierce through the shrouded trees, tearing their way through the dark greenery. Luminescent shafts burn away the surrounding shades, eager to pursue a path within the smoky tendrils. I continue, hands wiggling inside the furry pockets of my coat. A flicker of warmth soothes the numbness, but the draught lingers. My fingertips ache for more heat, craving the intensity of an inferno.

A sigh befalls my mouth. Walking onwards, destination unclear, my feet keep at their brisk pace. Sheets of snow crunch beneath the bottom of my boots, the wind progresses its rage. It howls forward, nipping the edges of my cheeks. I gulp down a chunk of air, eyes gazing in the distance as a sense of unease strikes me. My stomach churns in discomfort—bile boils up into my throat.

There, amidst the wisps of shadows, stands a singular lamp post. Its light sputters, failing to remain in a constant state. A lone room sits behind it, the lamp post acting as its sole source of light. Somehow, against the bitter coils of suppression and relentless chants on never coming back, I am here again. I tell myself that it is the weather forcing me to revisit this place, that these winter nights allow its icy claws to rip a gaping hole. Sometimes, I desire a time without these afflictions, where I could ignite a fire, disregarding concerns from others. Its flames would smoulder those against us—no, against me.

I enter the room, feet moving. My body switches into autopilot, while an overwhelming melancholy hammers my mind. The memories engulf me, stifling the calamity from the outside environment. The air, thick with unresolved tension, lines the entire room, invading every crevice, small and large. It slithers across the floor, sinking into the splintered cracks of the dark brown wood. A couple of tables and chairs remain from long ago, aged against the toils of time. I take a large breath, eyes blinking—a sense of blurriness settles in, distorting my vision. Stray tears dive from their confines, desperate to escape from their confinements. Knees buckling, a hand juts out on a nearby table to steady me. I collapse on the chair, sinking deeper into it. Legs trail their way to the other side of the table, wishing they could disappear, alongside me.

I could disappear.

I could vanish, and no one would bat an eye. Traces of my physicality would cease to exist, leaving nothing but a strange shift in the surrounding atmosphere. Everyone would brush it off, ignoring the variance for other, pressing matters.

Alas, the perpetuity of objects seems to reach a culmination. Nothing will disappear in a finite sense—there will always remain a ghost, lingering around the skins of our recollections.

It may be a ghost of someone, or the forgotten promises shared between countless individuals, all without a name to call upon.

Or it is a mere object, perhaps without significance to any but the owner.

Sighing, I descend further in the seat, willing myself into a motionless state. I try not to spare a glance at the surviving table decoration—a singular red lily, although wilted, sits at the corner of the wooden table. Any residual strength, albeit small, continues to falter at the appearance of that red lily. Even if my heart aches to touch it, to seize its petals into my fingers, I don't continue.

I say that a fleeting moment is anything, but a trivial matter. It is cold and spiteful, yet warm all the same. The unpleasantries, to say the least, outweigh the beauty of transience—that is, from one's initial reaction. Its heaviness compares to the size of a large boulder, stressing the threads connecting to the inner circuitry. But still, this warmth is akin to an affectionate hug, or a brush of a hand from a stranger. Their fingertips caress the softness of my skin, soothing the throbbing insides of my stomach.

Stop.

Hands fall to my head, chest heaving as elbows rest themselves on my knees. The bile rises again, affixing in the crevices of my throat. I do not understand; it should not stay there. It should spew onto the floor, amalgamating with the existing filthiness.

But it does not. It never does.

Again, I whimper, accompanying the occasional sniffles. The red lily lingers in my sight, unable to rid its presence.

Just one touch. Nothing else, but a single feel of the petal.

My neck cranes upwards, fingers already heading for their destination. I doubt they require my approval, for they did not need the mind to decide. Their patience is waning, almost to the point of untraceable subsistence.

I stroke the lily's petals, prompting a sense of unresponsiveness, but of one similar to sitting beside an extinguished fire. A memory resurfaces upon this touch, the gentle hums of violin strings materialising in my mind.

Soft, melodious tunes echo in my ears—it sends a brief smile to my lips, if only for a moment. Teeth chatter, struggling with the coldness. I clench my fists, resorting to stuffing them in my pockets. A red lily sits inside the right pocket—its shrivelling petals comfort me, calming the rough callouses on my fingertips. I trudge against the thick layers of snow, marching past the music hall. In an unconscious attempt of distraction from the soft whines, I grip the stem, nails etching half-moons upon the petals. Even still, they remain in my mind, an unconscious babble of off-tune notes melding into a disastrous refrain.

The bitter wind remains strong, nipping at my cheeks. Bits of snow cover patches of my coat, concealing the black wool. Faint footsteps draw nearer, halting as they reach behind me.

“Lilia!” I heed no attention, pressing forward.

“Please, I beg of you,” A hand reaches for my arm, gripping the fabric of my coat. “Come back home.” Her eyes become glossy, shedding faint tears. They glisten underneath the lamp posts, its harsh yellow lighting contrasting the pallidness of her skin.

I stop moving.

A level of uncertainty emerges inside, unsure if I would be able to dissuade her perseverance a second time.

“You know my answer, and yet why do you continue to follow me?” I command, voice vacant; a blank expression obscures my face, burying the countless emotions troubling my mind. It confuses her, urging further pleas.

“Please. Lilia. Come back home. You belong here.”

“No, I don’t,” I pause, gulping down built-up saliva. “I do not belong here. Stop trying to convince me, it won’t work.” Her hands grip tighter on my arms—I peel them off, pushing them away. Our eyes meet briefly—she starts to sob, realising the end of the conversation. I turn away first, not wishing to prolong this moment any longer. Her cries echo, the sound clutching onto any semblance of audible range. Gradually, it fades as I bridge the distance between us, smothering the waning flames of the strings performing for its dying breath.

A car appears within my line of sight, red lights blinking as I enter inside. I scramble to find my keys, throwing the pocket’s contents onto the other seat. The lily wedges itself in front of a woollen blanket as if asserting its significance amongst my possessions.

In a way it does — the value is immeasurable, despite its finite-state. The redness bleeds a heavy brown, the temporality of the flower anxious for closure. It slinks onto the rest of the petals, painting a stark crimson shade rather than a bright glow of cherry-kissed lips. The warmth dissipates, melting into thin wisps of smoke.

I look down, hands clutching on the wheel, the leather hissing at the cold, yet clammy skin. My fingers curl tighter, obstinance pervading into my body. Again, I am unsure.

Should I drive? Should I leave this place? What will happen if I do?

I take a breath.

In and out.

In and out.

I turn the ignition on.

Emotions blur around — a haze of thoughts culminates into a flurry of nothingness. Much like a void, its contents dissolve a hollow mess. A wasteland of unknown potential; a barren desert of mirages, its features enigmatic to most, if not all.

It slips through my fingers, the red lily, that lies in my palm. A token of her, of my sister and the fragments of our connection.

Alas, the fragility of it all stumbles into silence; a stillness dampens the air, disturbing the calamity of my recollections. Cessation of movement; it halts, suspending in a phrase of the time, the temporal plane unfamiliar, yet all the same.

I rip the petals out.

They fall onto the ground, a sense of relief surfacing as their existence dwindles.

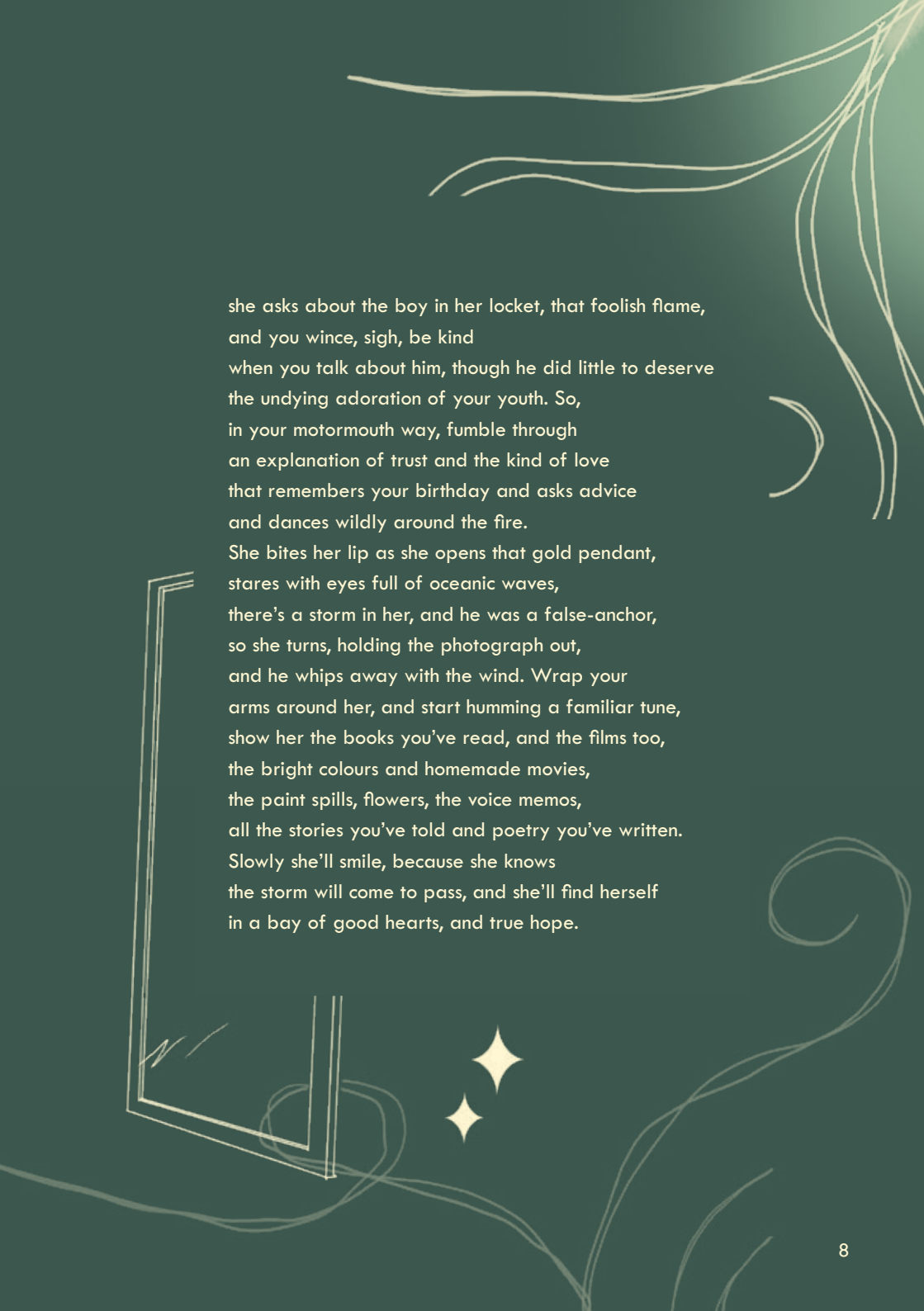


If you met her now

Caitlyn Dixon

A bean pole, lanky and awkward,
with homemade tracksuit pants despite the heat,
a badly paired neon butterfly tee,
muddied red-checkered vans,
smiles up at you, but shock dawns.
Because now you don't crop tops,
embroidered denim shorts and a glowing smile,
scuffed leather boots, citrus scent
and big earrings. So show her around
your camera roll, introduce her to
the bright smiles and kind eyes, hearts
who have adored her like no one else did, who
invite her out and laugh and tease and care.
Unfamiliar, yet so deeply like family,
and you can see in her eyes, that
sparkle of hope. She looks through your
music, shocked to see so many artists
she thought were trash. You read
their lyrics like poetry, and the disdain
she holds in her shoulders will soften.
Hold your hands out to her and dance,
hair flying with its own choreography,
glistening in the dusky glow of hope. Scream
the cringiest lyrics whole-heartedly, pull
all the awkward, self-deprecating moves. But when





she asks about the boy in her locket, that foolish flame,
and you wince, sigh, be kind
when you talk about him, though he did little to deserve
the undying adoration of your youth. So,
in your motormouth way, fumble through
an explanation of trust and the kind of love
that remembers your birthday and asks advice
and dances wildly around the fire.

She bites her lip as she opens that gold pendant,
stares with eyes full of oceanic waves,
there's a storm in her, and he was a false-anchor,
so she turns, holding the photograph out,
and he whips away with the wind. Wrap your
arms around her, and start humming a familiar tune,
show her the books you've read, and the films too,
the bright colours and homemade movies,
the paint spills, flowers, the voice memos,
all the stories you've told and poetry you've written.
Slowly she'll smile, because she knows
the storm will come to pass, and she'll find herself
in a bay of good hearts, and true hope.

I am drying out

Georgia Mitchell

My gossamer underclothes
outside on the open terrace

as Sunday relinquishes his holy grasp
by way of marked paper and blushed flesh

between damp hair and spattered scarlet glow,
slides a divorce that shames the natural

yet still. I am. At peace with the blemish
delighting in thy simplicities, now learning to

cherish the painful pattern hard
wrought iron presses into softness.

When words aren't enough I'll open my casket
and pour down lost lifetime to the street below,

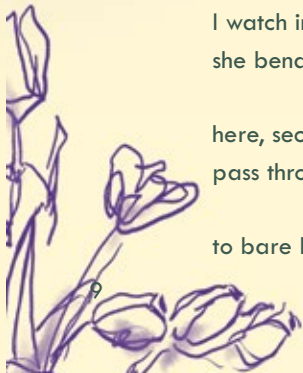
I'll sift through cackles and cracks
their bubbling red repulsion

and find deep inside, an image of her
beginning an innocent game.

I watch in aged wisdom
she bends low collecting their pain

here, secrets of incipient babe
pass through the womanly shape

to bare like opulent adornment,



and burn when one word is spoken

but this time, this day, that word is forbidden
so with sacred kiss my angel fades,

clouds of gold fold forward their gift in lore
and naked Eve is finally restored.

Let us bow unto time and await
the escape up here above

blackened cement, where sleepless souls
ascend to hang in the easy breeze,

skin tingling with the epiphany
we have nothing to do but be

and ask for age to pass through us.
I with silvery hair and you, threadbare lace

relishing today with thee;
knowing I may struggle to come

to terms with fated mortality
for my sentimentality

betrays the wavering desire
to no longer exist at all

for you are but a figment, immune to death and drought
but as for me, dear lover, I fear

I am drying out



Sarbat (lemon juice)


Kimaya Gadre

In my mother tongue, Marathi, words often have genders. Male and female. 'To' (तो) and 'ti' (ती). It's interesting that depending on the object it becomes male or female. For example, it's 'ti' (coffee), female, versus 'to' chaha (tea), male. If we consider a plate, small knife, slipper, chair, pillow, kettle, car, or trees, they all take the female form, whereas, when speaking about a cup, phone, television, photograph, large knife, pile of rubbish, or a sofa, a speaker must use the masculine term.

Let me explain a little more, it's not just the actual object that we call differently; it remains a gender-free object. Rather, it is the preposition attached to it that takes on a gender. Take for instance the word 'that'. In English, there is no implied gender in the phrase 'that tea' or 'pass me that tea', but in Marathi 'to chaha' is male. It is not only limited to prepositions either, but also extends to possessive nouns such as the word 'my'. As with prepositions, referring to an object characterised as a certain gender, you must also alter your own gender when using possessive nouns. For example, when a speaker says 'my coffee' in English, there is no implied gender. However, in Marathi, there are multiple words for 'my', such as 'mazha' (माझा), which is masculine whereas 'majhi' (माझी) is feminine. Since coffee apparently is female, regardless of the speakers' own gender, they must refer to it as 'majhi coffee.'


This transformation of gender isn't limited to speaking about objects either. When anyone refers to female friends, sisters, female cousins, aunts, grandmothers, mothers, or goddesses they will say 'my' in the feminine 'majhi'. Whereas, when they talk about male friends, brothers, male cousins, uncles, grandfathers, fathers, or gods they will say 'my' in the masculine 'mazha'. What a funky gender-bending ability, it makes me question traditional gender norms that are still very prevalent in India today. Ever since I was a child, I was fascinated by the thought a language (particularly because I didn't see this in English) could enable gender, and everything linked to it, to undergo change so easily.

Now, you might be wondering about the title: 'Sarbat.' 'Sarbat' (सरबत) can be roughly translated to 'lemonade', but I would describe it as a type of lemon juice. It is a drink that cools people down on hot days, promotes hydration, and may even cure headaches. It is made of water, sugar, salt, and of course the juice from a freshly squeezed lemon. I've always liked this drink. It's not just the taste I like, it's the



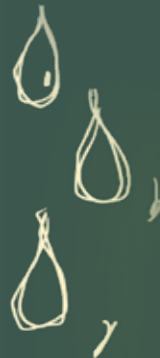
fact that we can all relate to it, and probably should aspire to be like it. Why would anyone aspire to be like 'lemon juice?' Sarbat is not a man or a woman. Sarbat is non-binary, genderless, not male nor female, or both male and female. It is completely androgynous. Sarbat is not a 'to' or a 'ti'. Rather, it is a 'te' (ते).

Of course, there are other objects that are a 'te' such as books, an individual tree, a blanket, a pot, a fingernail, a washing machine, a leaf, some sunscreen, a jacket, some nail polish, but Sarbat is the first word I noticed was a 'te.' I suppose it is special to me in that sense. 'Te' can also be used to describe 'that' or 'that thing'. I might for example ask, "what is that (thing)?" as "te kay ahe?" 'Te' is also used to address a collective of many things, or even people. It is, in that sense, very similar to the English 'they', as a collective or as a gender-neutral term. 'Te' is the most inclusive and welcoming word I know.



As I mentioned earlier, there are multiple ways of saying 'my', another is 'mabh'(माझ). This word, in my opinion, is analogous to 'te', as it is the gender-neutral possessive noun. If I, or someone else, anyone else, regardless of their gender, wanted to say 'my Sarbat', they would have to use the gender free, 'mabh Sarbat.' I never realised how complicated my language was until I thought about the words 'te', 'mabh', and many others.

To me, Sarbat signifies comfort.



Sacrifice

Alexa Stevens

Content warning: body horror

I left my left hand behind, gripping
To a shopping cart, the other day.
Completely forgotten, in a rush,
Unclaimed in a
Lost and found. I have
My number scrawled
On the underside of my pinky
Just in case it happens again.
It's the new age of that
Old story with the
Green ribbons and
Heads rolling off, where we are
All Marie Antoinette retellings, in that
Sick slick frenzy of
Exposing a woman. Everyone wants a
Piece, under the shiny choker,
Beneath the bloodied rags.
It's not like I haven't
Found other women's
Wandering body parts, before.
Eyes left in sinks, tears or
Water beneath them. Mouths
Stained, an ear, a foot with
Cloud tattoos to always walk
Above the ground (as quoted the owner).
Never my own, before.
Before, it was a life of exhausting
Yet almost exciting

Inevitability, like
Waiting two hours in a ride queue and
Finally making it to the front. Not
On, but to the front. Just waiting
For the other foot to drop
Off. Glass ceiling,
And all that distaste at the scotch tape
Bracelets, the subtle stitches
Colleagues with college funds sport.
It didn't matter, either way.
The rollercoaster still dropped us all,
The invisible, inevitable axe to fall.
So now
I have an ending and a beginning
Separate. Indistinct lines,
Buffering video pixelated
Nail beds. Perhaps this is what
I needed to sacrifice to write.
Just a little something
More for the world to take.
A piece of me like a slice of cake.



On Becoming a Merman

Waiwai Yeap

Content warning: suicide

For as long as you can remember, you have always wanted to be a merman. The waves have called out to you ever since you were a child, whispering in your ear as you tossed and turned at night, skin uncomfortable and crooked on your body.

When you're at school, you daydream about it, the roar of the ocean and the sea foam cresting the waves. If you had to describe the water, you would say it's like silk, smooth and comfortable. Your skin feels just right on you when you're in the ocean, a current of aliveness running through your veins as you submerge yourself, waves lapping gently over your ear.

The water is the only place you have ever felt at home.

Of course, most claim the ocean is temperamental. Some people in your town can't even swim, saying it's a waste of time when there is a whole world out there, on land, waiting to be explored. You know this, and the ocean is fickle, but over time, it has shared its secrets with you, letting you find refuge underwater.

The bottom of the ocean? That's your world, a place where sea creatures peek at you with curious eyes from behind the coral. A place where seaweed dances in the light, casting a green tinge onto the sand below. There's something enchanting about the way it moves in the currents, tendrils reaching out towards the sun.

You love everything about the ocean, but you love this best. And every time you watch the seaweed dance, you are filled with hope.

You're never really sure why you need hope, and why it seems to drain away as soon as you set foot on land. But you suspect it has something to do with Mother.

Or, if you want to be more accurate, the absence of her.

She's always gone when you return home, as you walk into the house that has never felt like home. The kitchen always greets you in the same way, with a slice of buttered toast sitting atop the dull granite kitchen counter, a single bite taken out of it.

Sometimes you feel that Mother has forgotten how to live because all she ever seems to do is work. You think this more often these days, especially when you slide the piece of toast into the bin and take out last night's leftovers from the fridge. Even more so when you sit at the dining table, tiles cooling your feet as you eat alone.

You think you understand why. Why she never talks to you about anything that matters, why she never seems to have time for you anymore. But adults are strange sometimes, complicated, and you often can't tell what Mother is thinking when you see her on her days off, her face plastered with a smile as she kisses your head before moving away from you, gaze already distant. You realised after a while that she was looking out towards the ocean.

You're supposed to be asleep when Mother returns to the house, and you often are, but sometimes you stay up and stare at the ceiling, listening to the waves wash onto the beach. When you hear a car pull in, you look up, resting your head on the sky-blue window frame.

She is always in the same position, bag abandoned behind her on the pier. If you squint your eyes a little bit, you can see the folders and clipboards spilling onto the wood, papers being ruffled by the sea breeze. It's the only time where her work doesn't seem so important to her.

If you could see her eyes, they would be pensive, her fingers locked together as she looks out towards the horizon. You don't know this, but you speculate anyway, as your fingers caress the peeling paint of your window frame that Father painted for you.

Father left when you were small, crossing the ocean to the other side of the world. That's what Mother tells you when you're supposed to be asleep, when she strokes your hair and sits on your bed, words muffled as her tears fall onto your blanket. When she leaves, you sit up again and stare at the closed door and at the droplets that shine in the moonlight. You wish, sometimes, that she would just talk to you. That you could hold each other close, you lying down and watching the sky as she tells you stories about him.

Maybe this is why you love the water.

Not because of the hidden world beneath it and not because you can swim as easily as you breathe, but because the water is the only thing that can make Mother human. The water is your only connection to Father.

You think about these things as you float in the water, staring at the pier above you and the grey expanse of clouds approaching. You think about many things.

Like how, sometimes, the friends that you used to have glance at you in the corridors. You can hear the nicknames they had once given you dancing on their lips. To them, you were the marlin, as fast as an arrow and as graceful as a swan.

Now, because you're known as the boy who swims alone at night, because being popular seems like the only thing that matters to them, they ignore you, just like everyone else. Now, you are nothing but part of the backdrop for everyone else's lives.

You cared, once.

But now that you think about it, you don't care that much anymore.

You're still there, under the pier as the first drops start falling. A smile dances on your lips as you watch others scurry for cover, newspapers and bags held over their heads. You have always loved a storm, and today is no different.

Drip.

You're safe, the pier protecting you from the onslaught of rain. You reach out and touch the old wood, staring at the gaps in the slats above.

Drip.

You can't help but watch the water slide in between the gaps, drops falling just beside your head. By now, Mother is on her way home from work, wipers working furiously as she makes her way into the evening traffic.

Drip.

You are mesmerised as the rainwater falls into the ocean, the droplet you're watching dispersing. You like to think it travels, far across the ocean to other lands beyond the horizon.

Drip.

All you can think about now is the water. Your teachers, classmates, family, have all blended into one mess and slid into the back of your mind. Nothing exists but the water.

Drip.

You have never felt comfortable in your own skin. The land has never felt right for you.

Drip.

You are only ever felt comfortable in the ocean, the sound of the waves as they curl across the beach never far from the forefront of your mind.

Drip.

The water is your life. Maybe, you think, it is only right that the ocean, your life, should be the one to take it from you.

Drip.

You hesitate for a moment, the human side of you screeching at you to return to the house. To live out your life like everyone else would. But the water calls you, lullaby reaching out to you across the waves. To be at home is all you have ever wanted.

Drip.

You make your decision and swim underwater, your legs being the last thing the land sees before you disappear. If anyone were watching, they would have sworn that your legs looked like a tail.

Your life doesn't exactly flash in front of your eyes as your breath runs out. Instead, you think about the ocean. Maybe, in the end, you'll become part of it, rushing across the world with the tides and currents. The thought makes you smile a human smile, your eyes broken but slowly mending.

Your chest burns. For the last time, you look at the world through your human eyes, focusing on the small sliver of sunlight you can see falling through the water.

You breathe in.

And then, you're gone.

Hacking/deeban

Isabella Newton

Content warning: murder

They bound down the sandstone steps, boogie boards in hand. They are almost there, only a few more steps to go, the cool reprieve of the water waiting to greet them. It had been hot that day, too hot to do anything. Sprawled across the lounge room, they had harassed their mother, “Can we go to the beach, can we have ice cream, can we have air-con like Auntie’s?”

Eventually the oldest child, Alice, alive to her namesake of leader, had come up with a plan. They couldn’t persuade their mother to drive them to the beach, but the river was a peaceful force; it had no waves or blue bottles or rips to contend with. If they took their boogie boards and made sure they had the strap firmly attached to their arm, they would have to be allowed to go.

Finally at the river’s edge. The youngest dove in, laughing as he hit the water. The older two were more cautious, as they clambered from rock to rock until they could step in, aware of the oysters that lined the shore. Soon all three were in the water, cool after the heat of the day.

“I bet I can paddle past the boats faster than you,” the youngest screams. There is a mad kick as they scramble on their boards, the sister yelling at the brother to slow down as they awkwardly kick and paddle, travelling further into the river. Alice bobs for a moment, adjusting to the languid embrace of the water as the eucalyptus stands silently guard on the shoreline before following her siblings.

Henry Hacking was born in England in 1750 and travelled to Australia onboard the HMS Sirius as a quartermaster. After being shipwrecked at Norfolk Island, he returned briefly to England before venturing back to Sydney. He was considered a good shot by most in the colony, being a brilliant game hunter, a desperately needed skill as food was scarce.

The two adults sit beside the river. The children meanwhile are meandering along the river’s edge, diverted by the crabs and pipis and rocks along the shore.

"Is Alice doing better, do you think?" the mother asks, smoothing out the red fringes of the picnic rug. There were concerning reports from teachers at school, a distinct lack of friends combined with a few too many lunches spent in the library.

"Maybe...she seems happy enough." Her father nods in his assessment, holding a cup of tea in one hand and cinnamon cake in the other. Alice shrieks, rivalling the noise from the galahs. Her brother has found a clump of seagrass to harass her with. He throws it at her, and she runs, as the river's mud sprays down on them, a grotty baptism.

Hacking is most famous for being the reported murderer of Indigenous resistance fighter Pemulwuy. He had opposed the European invasion and was shot on or around the 2nd of June 1802. Pemulwuy's head was then sent to Joseph Banks despite requests from his people to have it returned.

Alice knows she can win. The other girls are unsteady in their kayaks, awkwardly holding the paddles as they bob up and down. Alice shifts her weight in the kayak, centring herself, looking for a moment at the gum trees that line the shore, eager spectators to the race that is about to begin.

It is nice to feel confident in something for once. Sure, the girls might not particularly like her, and she might be completely baffled by the boys, but this is her place, her river. She knows it. The river laps against her kayak, nudging her forward, urging her on as she firmly grips the paddle, keenly watching the instructor.

"Ready" the instructor pauses, pulling a kayak back so it is in line with all the others. "Go!"

Alice paddles, pushing her kayak through the water. She has a rhythm, a good pace. The water glides past her, as she moves faster and faster. She passes the yellow buoy, the ad hoc finish line. The river beats against her kayak, cheering at her victory.

"Good job Alex," the instructor calls as the rest of the girls half-heartedly paddle over the line. Alice looks down at the river, another thing misnamed. "It's Alice actually," she whispers, but the instructor is too far away to hear.

Whilst Hacking did not face any charges for the murder of Pemulwuy, he did face convictions for perjury in October 1799 which he was pardoned for, stealing naval

stores in November 1803, which he was pardoned for, and for shooting and wounding a woman in April 1804, which he was not pardoned for.

Claiming he had been seduced, Hacking, once more, escaped the hangman and was instead transported to Van Diemen's Land as punishment, where he would die in obscurity, aged eighty-one. The river located on the southern outskirts of Sydney was named in honour of him by Matthew Flinders, with the name Port Hacking supplanting the name that the Dharawal people had given it, Deeban. The meaning of the word was never recorded.

The music from the party blasts in Alice's ears, as she scrunches up her eyes, trying to calm her breathing. It had been a

to come to this, a moment of defiant optimism on her part, that yes, she could handle this. With her stomach churning and her fingers shaking around the paper cup she holds; it was becoming abundantly clear that she could not.

The floor of the living room heaved with people as Alice darted in between, into the darkness of the backyard. She walked along the fence line, trying to ignore what other people could be thinking about her exit, trying to instead focus on her breathing, pleading with herself not to have a full-blown panic attack here in front of all these people she knew.

Alice reaches the edge of the backyard; it leads to an escarpment and at the bottom she can hear the familiar rhythm of the Port Hacking. Her river. Seated on the grass, with the coldness seeping through her jeans, she watches the lights from the houses glinting across the river, their lights dancing on the dark surface.

The river provides a tempo as she times her breathing with the water as it goes in and out, stretching out across the sand. Alice knows this river that traverses through her community, knows its inlets, knows the creatures that live in it and the eucalyptus that lines it. She knows it better than those that gave it such a hateful and foolish name. Hacking? For this place? Not for this river, a gentle ever-present witness to her, somewhere she can keep coming back to no matter what happens, no matter where she goes or what battles her mind face.

Alice pulls her fingers out of the cold dirt. She knows she won't feel like this forever, nor will this river, her river, always have to honour such a violent man. One day it will be reprieved of it. Revived, Alice breathes in, standing up as she walks away from the tender rhythms of the river, back towards the pulsing noises of the party.

Ben

Emily Best

"An artwork is not a riot or a strike or a blockade or a commune. And we must be careful not to forget that the future we desire will not be won in the gallery but in the streets and through collective struggle."

- Andrew Brooks, The Island, 2020



In November 2019 my mother and I go to the Art Gallery of New South Wales. I am a freshly anointed fashion school dropout and art school beginner, she a weary supporter of my constant personality changes. We are typical gallery-goers—self-conscious, aiming for pensive. We go for Japan Supernatural, absorb its vibrance, babbling as we exit, and end up downstairs, where the Quilty retrospective is being held.

The exhibition spans through multiple rooms. Nothing is left out, from Toranas to war portraiture, disembodied life vests to giant Rorschachs. Mountains of oil, frozen in time. I'm transfixed immediately, absorbed by Quilty's enduring adolescent angst, enraptured in the earthy, bruised tones of his portraiture. But it's his newer works that I'm drawn to the most, great torturous, grotesque abstractions, "deformed ogres, bared teeth, writhing figures" of oil. They seem giant, impossible, magnificent.

I get as close as I can to the canvas, take about a thousand photos, scurrying home to document my findings on my Instagram with the simple caption: "ben quilty". Now, I have a name I can tuck in my pocket, pull out in a theory class, maybe receive a few impressed nods for it.

For a while, I revel in my discovery. My paintings grow bigger, more impulsive, decorated in wide eyes and creeping fingers. My mind becomes coated in thick impasto, the world bathing in that distinctive shade of Quilty lilac. I become a devoted follower, consumed by his "fierce moral energy", swept up in grand gestures of allyship. Convincing myself that an artist with immense commercial success could be a beacon for Real Change, could look right in the eye of The Institution and spit in it, eating the rich without needing to eat himself.

Overtime, the spark begins to dwindle. With every new painting, every grand gesture of activism, a feeling of monotony grows. I start resenting Quilty, sick of seeing him everywhere, tired of the "the signs of expressivity but without anything actually being expressed." Quilty becomes synonymous with rolled eyes, with predictability. And this is where it should end, where I ought to just accept my aversion to Quilty's work and focus my attention on better artists. But there's something deeper to it, sharper than boredom. It's the dig in the ribs, the twisted discomfort of something else I can't quite name. It consumes me until a new obsession forms—one that picks Quilty apart in hopes of understanding just what it is about him that makes me wince.

While researching for this piece I tell my partner all about Quilty, about my strained, shifting view of him. I tell him about his insistent portrayal of a working-class persona alongside his kinship with billionaire Kerry Stokes. I tell him about his life jacket series, the way the semiotics seem somehow displaced. I read him quotes in a sarcastic drawl. He listens diligently, lets me ramble, until he finally says, "He really sounds like a Ben."

Ben Fordham calling me “attractive” at fifteen. Ben Roberts-Smith, the stench of disgrace. Ben 10, childhood sweetheart. Ben Affleck and his revolting brother. Benny and the Jets. Ben Foster as William Burroughs in Kill Your Darlings. Ben Shapiro. Benjamin, the donkey from Animal Farm. Mr. Clean and Mr. Ben are living in my loft. Walter Benjamin, completely impossible, assigned reading, pain in my ass. Telling everyone at fourteen that if I had a son, his name would be Benjamin.

Ben Quilty. Ben, my boyfriend when I was eighteen, taking a lighter to my naivety, pulling it in, breathing it out, setting it alight.

I hear myself reassuring my friends, saying “he’s just drunk”. I feel hands around my throat, crushing, not holding. I see myself, small, shaking, sobbing on the phone, apologising, always constantly fucking apologising.

If I wince when I think of Quilty, maybe this is the source. Maybe it is because he is Ben first, Quilty second. Because underneath the persona of Quilty, the “impassioned activist, using his brush to draw our attention to our responsibility as citizens living in an increasingly fragmented world” he is just Ben, perfect poster boy of the artistic genius, balancing between good intentions and an increasingly wilful ignorance. The duality of the Quilty persona as lucrative darling of the art world and champion of the downtrodden, makes him the perfect face of contemporary art in the settler state; one that is progressive when it is appropriate, profitable when it counts.

When convenient, Quilty’s paintings embody what Natalie Thomas calls “Activism Lite”. The most immediate example is his 2016 work, ‘The Last Supper’, a monstrous work of writhing, dismembered limbs, bared teeth and a decapitated Donald Trump, all surrounding a long, white table that quite ferociously nods to the da Vinci work of the same name. The imagery is immediate, the meaning vague but clear enough as some form of societal critique. “I thought of them sitting around having the last supper as the world burns around them,” Quilty remarks in 2019, “It’s all about chaos. It’s a representation of these men—these straight white men.” The audience looks at the painting, pausing, reflecting, nodding pensively. The message is received: this painting is about men that are Bad. These “straight white men”—of which Quilty, who is all three, is notably absent—must be held to account, be loudly critiqued, but for what? If we assume it is, as Quilty says, for watching “the world [burn] around them”, are we implying the responsibility of the capitalist class—the Donald Trumps of the world—for the world’s destruction? And if this critique is coming from Quilty, who broke the record for his highest selling painting in November 2020 at \$140,000 only to smash it in April 2021 at a staggering \$220,000, how are we able to judge its authenticity? When the structure that continues to set the world ablaze is the same one that allows him to make over 5 times the Australian average yearly wage from two paintings alone, how are we to trust a critique that sees him place himself firmly outside of it?

Quilty's activist persona assures the audience that just viewing 'The Last Supper' is a progressive act, one that encourages them to be moved, but not to the point of discomfort. Activism becomes reduced to fleeting moments of reflection, a sombre pause, an empty mind, confined to the gallery space in a singular event. Vague gestures of liberal epiphany, intermingled with overwhelming commercial success, allow Quilty to "[take] the benefit of fame without its burden of self-reflection". And it's this exact commercialisation of activist ideas that makes him so irresistible to the state.

Australia loves Ben. In October 2011 we sent him over to Afghanistan as part of the Australian War Memorial's longstanding Official War Artist Scheme. With 30 Australian deaths in the 10 years since 2001, most men in their 20s, it was a perfect time for Quilty, recently praised for his works surrounding young Australian masculinity, to enter the conversation. The resulting works from Quilty's time as War Artist saw returning veterans stripped—literally and figuratively—vulnerable, fleshy bodies and forlorn faces against dark, abyssal backgrounds. In them, Quilty aims to convey the trauma of these returning soldiers, the difficulty in slotting back into regular life only to "drop, fall, crashing down to earth" after developing post-traumatic stress disorder. And the subject matter of the series is not where the issue lies. The problem with the series, much like the 'The Last Supper', is the ways in which it seemingly omits the essence of the problem, focusing instead on the surface to allow Quilty and the viewer to feel as though they are a part of a ground-breaking, important conversation. Kit Messham-Muir, citing Rex Butler, writes:

[The] paintings' expressionistic aesthetic actually conveys nothing of the trauma experienced by their sitters, yet it allows audiences to go through the motions by playing out the expressionist trope of externalising inner psychological and emotional states. 'Not only do we not come to know what the soldiers went through...[but] we ultimately do not want to know; and in fact what the paintings offer the viewer (and hence their public success) is a way of avoiding any real encounter with the outcome of war, the public performance of responsibility without any of its real-world consequences.

These real-world consequences stem from the true motives of Western involvement in Afghanistan: profit and expansion under the guise of border protection. Australian soldiers in Afghanistan only ever existed to be, as summarised by Natalie Thomas: "the geo-political puppets of the US interventionist policies." But the paintings do not speak to these consequences, nor the most frequently ignored victims of the

war: the 46,000 Afghan civilians killed and the over 2.2 million displaced as of September 2021. They're not supposed to. Quilty says it himself, "in the contract, the job is to tell the story of the Australian people on the frontline." The US invasion of Afghanistan and Australian involvement becomes a necessary evil, an unavoidable sacrifice, in a sense, a natural occurrence. The ADF is able to use Quilty's unique brand of commercial activism to incite a deep sense of pity and respect for the horrors of war within the viewer while Thales arms manufacturers sponsor the opening of the exhibition at the Australian War Memorial. The very cycle that created the post-traumatic stress disorder in these veterans—the same one that Quilty is attempting to critique—continues, unchallenged, its necessity reinforced. Thomas notes: "The thing about art about war, art that might purport to be 'anti-war', is how easily it can slip into propaganda that perpetuates war." Quilty's brand of activism allows him and his audience to convert real-world atrocities into ponderable concepts, pedagogical exercises for the gallery visitor. The War Artist scheme continues, the paintings are sold off, and Quilty regards the experience as "a healthy sign of a good democracy"

At the same time as Quilty is detaching himself from all responsibility for this two-dimensional, intellectual mode of activism, and the media clambers to congratulate him for his valour. "What he feels about the world is communicated so adroitly and so directly...with potency and relevance," says Lisa Slade, curator of the Quilty retrospective, "No one is left out of the conversation." But Quilty's paintings are not open-ended, and there is no opportunity given to respond. Instead, Quilty preaches, the media shares the gospel, and we hold onto what Thomas calls "paternalistic assuredness." "Quilty solves all of life's ills," she continues, "just like Daddy." And it's this paternal authority that links Quilty back to the broader issue of white activism in the settler state, activism that champions the white reformist, pushing back against neo-liberalism but not so far as to destroy it. Ben Quilty becomes a character for the state to deploy when needed, a replicable, relatable everyman that makes his white audience feel safe. Quilty's voice, his wealthy, white, male voice, floods the contemporary art space, flushing out other voices, assuring us they need not be listened to. Quilty knows what's best. All we need to do is listen. And without even knowing it, we are protecting the myth of white sovereignty.

Centring Quilty as the paternal white hero allows Australian contemporary art to continue to draw, "whiteness as the winning ballot for steering cultural conversation". The white voice continues to be legitimised as the natural leader. If News Corp, Nine Entertainment and the Defence Force seem to love Quilty, it isn't because he's a true revolutionary. It's because the persona of Quilty, progressive and

paternal, can be used as an answer to what Aileen Moreton-Robinson refers to as “an anxiety of dispossession, which rises to the surface when the nation as a white possession is perceived to be threatened.” White sovereignty, in all its fragility, relies upon the continuous validation of itself. Quilty leads us to heaven along the easiest path possible. This is the path of voting in better pollies, using a keep cup, painting a big painting of nothing. We follow Quilty, and by proxy, we follow the state while we think we are fighting against it. The collective struggle is replaced with a divine saviour.

There is no better or more literal example of this than Quilty’s cover story for the Good Weekend on February 23rd, 2019. Brook Turner’s article is flooded with lofty praise for Quilty’s modesty despite his celebrity, the cover not at all subtle in the ways it frames Quilty as a literal white saviour. The contrast stark, the colours drained, Quilty appears shirtless and rugged, a crown of barbed wire atop unkempt hair. We see the lines on his face, the grey in his beard, the furrow of his brow. Here we see Quilty indiscreetly labelled as the new Christ, condensed into an easily-identifiable icon. There is no need for protesting, boycotting, leafletting, unionising, decolonising, marching, rioting, spitting, yelling, refusing, organising, redistributing, not when we have Ben. Quilty is Christ, Christ is saviour, Christ is white, and white is king. The narrative continues. In his article, Turner muses: “if Ben Quilty hadn’t existed, Australia may well have had to invent him.” I wonder if he realises that inventing Ben Quilty is exactly what Australia has already done.

If I seem like I am grasping for any way to critique Quilty, maybe it is because I am. Maybe I am irrational, like a former lover scorned. My opinion of Quilty is slippery; sour one moment and sympathetic the next. I can’t help but feel guilty, like I have somehow wronged him. Because how much are we to blame for the way Quilty is portrayed? Ultimately, he never explicitly labels himself an activist, it’s the Good Weekend and GQ, and the War Memorial and the Art Gallery of New South Wales. But at the same time, it’s a title that he never actively distances himself from either. It’s still Quilty that went to Afghanistan to make a difference. It’s still Quilty playing the character, speaking up when convenient, quiet when not. It’s still Ben that picked up the crown of barbed wire, placed it upon his brow, and let us take his photo.

Editorial note: Please see footnotes and citations of ‘Ben’ online at <https://www.arc.unsw.edu.au/publications/unsweetened-literary-journal>

RUBICON

Vaishnavi Nanda Kumar

for years she never saw her city
ran away
someplace pretty
got on a plane to leave it all behind
(mostly) never changed her mind

local libraries, shelved memories
backyard marigold
fresh bread from the main street bakery
stale wounds buried, un2old

bated breath; new blood; new life;
the gift Of death; rebirth from strife
the past wrangled by a divergent present
castles in the sky no longer stand
their rubble kissing unfamiliar ground
rose glasses from ruby sand

a lifetime later, she returned
her fears fully accounted
she would be out of place, unfamiliar
a stranger in every way that counted

but her fears were proven untrue
the city was the same one she knew
the same chlorine scent from the pool
the same letter board outside the primary school

would it scald all the same places?
familiar names,
unfamiliar faces,
or could it be her home again?
pavements,
linoleum,
liminal spaces.

times change, expectations sink
the past and the present shift out of sync
the woman today would never forget
the river of no return, with banks rust-red
the same city
the sailor long gone
someplace pretty

Rubicon.

The Sixth

Isaac Di Matteo

Content warning: climate crisis, death, violence

Frogs in a Pot

Mum says it won't be like this forever, that soon, eventually, we'll be able to settle somewhere all year round. Now that we're well away from summer, and it's feasible to be Outside during the daytime for short periods, we took our chance in abandoning that congested and sullen library den in nomadic pursuit of shelter elsewhere. It's ingrained in you from birth, but everyone back at the library, even Mum, would always insist on regurgitating how the Outside affects our bodies; too many horror stories, too many loved ones lost not to. The way I comprehend it is, Outside's bare heat and humidity exceeds the capability of our body's cooling system, with prolonged exposure boiling us alive. Apparently, it wasn't always like this. Living in the library for so long, I spent a lot of time reading about the slow leadup to this exacerbated heat stress. Some two-hundred years ago, the Earth was so full of life—drastically more vast expanses of flora, fauna, and humans. An ecologist by the name of J. Diamond likened the primary, man-made drivers for this 'Sixth Mass Extinction' as the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." Despite the huge timeline gap in printed information, I can't seem to understand how, with such obvious evidence of material and projected damage to life on Earth, Diamond's dismal prophecy still became reality. I suppose I don't want to believe that the entrenched societal greed of select groups of humanity are to blame. I appreciate Mum's enduring optimism though, each winter she'll say to me, "This is the coldest yet. Nature is healing."

First Horseman: Habitat Destruction

Industrial development, plantations, pastures, ongoing deforestation, and reckless land-use lead to and concluded in avian extinction. For just over fifty years now, investigators have been drawn to the varying kinetic dialects of countless bird families facing annihilation. Presently, Curve-Billed Reedhaunters have become overwhelmed, their motional dialogue now more anxious and mercurial than ever.

Movements in March 2072

Sentinel positioning among Curved-Bill Reedhaunters has become a thing of the past. They no longer have the composure or the posture of alertness to maintain their once stable stance of communicative detection. Now, it's a constant spasm of under-threat manoeuvres: Bird Plow, Bullet, and nonsensical renditions of Popcorn, coupled with wailing squawks. It's a troublesome sight, the mental collapse of this beautiful species. With far less than fifty percent of their habitat-suitable range leftover,⁷ they're simply lost, confused, and scattered. Over time, they've been speaking with heightening trepidation to other families – I can see them, hear them. They know of the widespread extinctive loss in a way us humans could never comprehend.

Plants and invertebrates on land have also met, or have been on the precipice of meeting, extinction at the hands of human-driven habitat loss. The Canary Islands, a Spanish archipelago off the coast of North-western Africa, were met with ecological observers and researchers, predicting the downfall and erasure of life across these oceanic islands if the status-quo of habitat ruin remained.

Canary Islands, August 2074

Since our crew's initial findings, I've returned to these islands from time to time. Despite the clear, dooming predictions from our results, nothing changed. It has been a blessing and a curse that the endemic plants of this archipelago were so resilient. Each visit, I could see their gradual death, their struggle to delay the inevitable and not concede against the non-existence of conservation. Their utter skirmish for life was to the benefit of the surrounding invertebrates, as land snails, beetles, butterflies, and several other invertebrates, bolstering the ecosystem organically, united in a ceaseless trudge for survival. All for nothing, and only now do they realise the damage done, although now is far too late.

Montesilvano Beach, Pescara, January 2075

By experiencing the same vein of urbanizing aggravations from human activity, life in the marine realm has been subject to severe degradation of quality, longevity, and diversity. Arguably, aquatic habitats have suffered the most noticeable dilapidation, as an observant Italian fisherman with a lifelong frequency at a coastal fringe of the Adriatic Sea uttered in his findings.

“Meno pesce, dove sono loro?”

(Missing fish – 99% of traditional marine resources depleted).

“L’acqua è così sporca...”

(Filthy water – 90% of species with filter function gone, degraded water quality, increased eutrophication).

“Più cemento dell’acqua adesso!”

(More concrete than water – coastal and shallow water habitats transformed for tourist amenities: buildings, jettisons, seawalls.)

Second Horseman: Overkill

Two armed poachers silently circle their desired game from afar, dreaming of promised riches from an illegal supply chain as the harsh Kenyan sun scorched the ground they crept. Ivory trade had only ceased, despite decades of fervent controversy, when elephants were no longer an extant population due to unrelenting hunting; a bleak finality, as the history of megafauna extermination washed over humanity once more. A leak of highly protected information fell upon the wrong ears, as it was made apparent that a small family of elephants, the only ones left on Earth, are in poorly safeguarded captivity. Following their intricate plan, an unfortunate poacher acted to drive elephants into extinction again, at the expense of their ivory tusks.

Upon the re-extinction of the biggest land animals on Earth, seasoned therolinguists unearthed complex, etched—using their tusks, it seems—Elephant scriptures on the arenaceous rocks from their isolated habitat. After days of rigorous, collaborative translation, employing every interpreted instance of Elephant phraseology they had available, the therolinguistic experts derived an approximate translation of the ultimate, out-of-character sentiments from the now extinct mammals: Elephant matriarchs have never been known to document expressions of sadness, or,

Mother

There is little for us here. I—we—are stifled [first translation of ‘stifled’ in the history of Elephant]. We are not meant for this. Pain—we feel that this is it. There are so many missing.

for that matter, anything that is unconcerned with their traditional behaviours and duties; those being: leadership, care, and the impartation of knowledge. It could be assumed that she was disoriented without the freedom to enact her innate purpose. With elephants’ powerful vocalisations that form long-range communication networks,

Father

Call—are they out there? Again—where are they? Bellow—we are not alone! Every day—I will try. Cry—they will hear me, or I will hear them, eventually.

connecting families from up to two kilometres away, the father seemed to have ‘journaled’ his frantic attempts to speak with other potentially distanced elephants. Consultations with the manning rangers were required to solidify the grounded assumption behind this, as they confirmed that the older males in the family did habitually omit formidable, low frequency vocalisations when roaming or separated from his immediate family members.

Here, the conclusion was made that the son of the family—bigger than usual for

Son

On edge. Standing. Morning and night. I do not look. They always [look]. Wait. It come, soon. Their fault. It is like this. I [am] sure. Once done. We [can] be free.

his age—was plotting to attack the ranger that kept constant watch at the ledge above their enclosed environment. While the rangers did rotate regularly, it is assumed that he was indifferent to making distinctions between them and would have attacked indiscriminately.

Pandora’s Box

Each day, like clockwork, everyone fulfills their duties for the betterment of the camp. There are still some professionals and experts amongst the survivors, who proudly use their skill set to further the liveability of our community. Engineers, tradespeople, medics, thinkers, entertainers, and countless more collaborate in unison to ensure we all thrive and that there is always space for newcomers—anyone from travellers seeking asylum to offspring (the latter is rare and cherished, considering the state of human fertility). However, those who are not specialists are of no less value; roles are not hierarchically attributed significance here.

Not that it was sudden, but it progressed at a good time, the cooling of

the Outside, none of this would have been possible in the peak of those conditions. When Mum and I arrived—say, fifteen years ago—the land was sparse and people sparser. To see this space as it is now, fills me—fills everyone, I think—with relief. Even then, we had heard rumours from all pockets of the world that these types of communities were being founded, flourishing under ideologies of mutual-aid, camaraderie, and solidarity. All of those evil facets of life that swept over the Earth are slowly dwindling away, as covetousness, famine, disease, strife, enmity, and greed are becoming forgotten concepts. No longer are there notions of inequity with the goal of some sort of material gain for one or a group; what's left in rich profusion is what was once so hard to find: hope.

Third Horseman: Invasive Species

“Come here! Quick! Yes, tuck in there, stay still, stay quiet.”

Fortunate of the day-time sunlight, the paternal Cottontail Rabbit tilted its vision to keep steady track of the skulking predator, while shrouding its small offspring with a blanket of overgrown fur. Frenzied, it vocalised a tense internal monologue...

“You used to hear about this, you know, up there in the States. But, here? How did they even get here? Before, it was once in a blue moon. You would patter around, see a feral cat or rat in the distance, and then make sure to maintain that distance. Now! Now, they're everywhere! These are the islands of western Mexico, damn it. Land of the grasses, sprouts, leaves, fruits, buds, all the good stuff!”

All the while, an opportunistic, feral cat still loitered, suspect of nearby prey and emanating an aura of violence.

“We're hungry, for crying out loud. Have you no sympathy? All these big, structural developments and loss of nature at the hands of those fleshy humans, and you want to come and invade our territory too? If this keeps up, there'll be more of these savage cats than there will be of us, we'll all be done for! Us, the hares, the shrews... even those troublesome smooth-toothed pocket gophers!”

His children watched on, as their father's manic soliloquy rose to boiling point.

“Enough of this. All of you stay here, I'm dealing with this once and for all.”

Fiercely darting out from the concealed nook, the Cottontail Rabbit bared its incisors as it went for the neck of the unsuspecting cat, propelled by the confidence of a shock attack. Effortlessly, the wild cat juked the rabbit and proceeded to tear it apart with a stark indifference.

Pondering a hundred or so years back, these windy summits were perfect for allowing the thin, wiry roots of Ferns to absorb nutrients and secure to substrates. Back then, our stems worked in harmony with the myriad of radicles and rhizoids across this zone; sedges, mosses, grasses, lichens, liverworts, and orchids all in peaceful coexistence. Over time, however, we all felt a gradual constriction.

It was minor to begin with, although much of what was once familiar—of what is even left—now appears alien to us, product of an invasive transformation. It was the arrival of that Red Cinchona, their obtuse trunks and obscure growth did not suit the Ferns' way of life; they were trees, and trees only bring competition.

While they did introduce newfound abundance and complexity to surrounding species and the zone itself, the Red Cinchona also annexed the majority of the space that we all needed. Our foliage is no longer evergreen, and we are much less useful to the land. We do not have the endurance of perennial species that live below this blustery summit. Soon, Ferns may join the register of extinction, incapable to reproduce, driven out spore by spore.

Fourth Horseman: Climate Change

Every morning at nine o'clock sharp, the daily news—capsuled as an interactive hologram projection—makes its way through the city's pneumatic tubes at light speed, arriving at every person's doorstep simultaneously. For nearly the entirety of the most recent generation, each report began containing a worldwide death count, including additional information for those interested. This year has seen the most unprecedented numbers to date, resulting in a cumulative eighty-six percent decline in human population.

Death Toll Info as of December 2186

Disease

Diseases have remained as the leading cause of death. Climate change continues to serve the transmission of deadly diseases across the globe, as the prevalence of extreme weather events increased. Water-borne diseases—various bacterial and viral diseases, diarrhoeal disease, cholera, dysentery, and typhoid—have been spreading wildly, caused by an amplified incidence of floods due to greater intensity of rainfall events (monsoons, cyclones) and glacier lake outburst floods. As well as this, the ever-growing, erratic nature of modern weather has also aided wildfire spreads, causing an increase in vector-borne diseases, such as malaria and dengue, which have ravaged densely populated, impoverished and/or arid areas in particular.

Resources

With death rife, severe scarcity follows. Labour supply chains are crumbling and resources that livelihoods rely on (crop yields—wheat, maize, sorghum, and millet) are being destroyed or becoming unobtainable. In addition, communities and families are being displaced due to these conditions and devastating climate disasters (conflagrations, tsunamis, bushfires, etc.). Lack of shelter and bodily strain from ongoing, unsafe movement has led to the collapse of many people. Food security is a rarity, and most harvests contain far less nutrient content, and, because of this, malnutrition has become a leading global killer.

Heat

With temperatures across the globe beginning to rise above physiological thresholds, permanent heatwaves and unendurable temperatures loom over humanity as the biggest threat of all. Heat-related mortality has already risen to levels that exceeded predictions, as lower-socioeconomic countries and locations that have minimal access to water, heat-protection technology, and shelter are recording enormous counts of fatalities. No one is safe. The terminology ‘Outside’ has begun to circulate in scientific and environmental discourses. Outside will be all outdoor environments and areas of bare sun exposure, initialising in approximately twenty years; an atmospheric development that could swallow the entirety of human life.

A Note from the Prime Minister:

There are growing concerns that if changes are not made, the human race could face total obliteration. We have listened to the people, and with the upcoming election, we are putting everything in place to give...



Reset

At the end of everything, we were to blame. Not me, or Mum, specifically, but the imperialists, capitalists, tech-evangelists, supremacists—all the people who were chasing some sort of status, some intangible goal under the guise of ‘civilisation’. Still, everyone was complicit in one way or another, especially those in developed countries. Fortunately, in the now, progress is always being made. At the forefront, dietary practices are completely shifting to support climate conservation and afforestation has become the single-most pivotal act of Earthly restoration worldwide.

While it is true that the blazing flames from humankind’s path of destruction have irreversible seared the Earth, we are also witnessing a new horizon. I never thought I’d live to see it: a fresh frontier as humanity is embodying the multispecies potentialities from yesteryear, a restitching of the deeply woven, colonial societal fabrics that once prevented much of humanity from participating in harmonious coexistence with nature. Temperatures have stabilised to an inhabitable level—the Outside now like a fever dream—and ecosystems are slowly adapting to their vastly distorted rhythms. I can’t help but think back to the library, a far-gone, almost surreal environment, and a time when Mum didn’t have a fraction of her current elderly bodily ailments. Somewhere far in the distance, well beyond our lifetime, I can envision a new world... one that, still, cannot be truly healed, but where old mistakes are never repeated.

Editorial note: Please see footnotes and citations of ‘The Sixth’ online at <https://www.arc.unsw.edu.au/publications/unsweetened-literary-journal>



Of you, variations exist

Aileen Wang

Content warning: substance use

Alice Michelle Smith sat down next to Michelle Alice Smith with the wryness of someone resigned to having become the butt of a joke.

“Hi,” she said, sticking out her hand. “My name is Alice Michelle Smith.”

Michelle Alice Smith eyed the outstretched hand, then the nametag pinned on Alice’s blouse. The moment stretched, elastic, like diaphragms expanding on an inhale. Preparation for speech, laughter, a sneeze—or perhaps just the common exhale? The bellows of the stopped conversation reached their maximum capacity for reactionary, processing silence. The moment crested; a wave stretched to breaking.

“You’re *kidding*,” Michelle said.

The two women’s eyes met. Then, wordlessly, pulled inwards by the gravity of absurdity, they both burst into a riot of laughter. People on either side glared, clucked their tongues, and made shushing sounds.

“Sorry!” Michelle gasped out between giggles. “It’s just—*Alice Michelle*—what were the chances—”

“And the Smith!” Alice got out through wheezes. That was enough to set them off again, until at last the host of the club meeting had had enough, and intoned frostily that it was all well and good for people to socialise and make connections—what the club was for, after all—but if they could please do so with some respect for the general course of proceedings as well as time and place, thank you.

The stars might have aligned that moment, only visible in the night on the other side of the world, and even then, only in some uninhabited desert, undrowned by human lights. Perhaps an astronomer noted it, or a photographer captured it, or an ant looked up and went mad in the shifting sand.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps they remained serene, atomic lights, unbothered by the vagaries of chance which so shift human fortunes. Perhaps that night was simply a night like every night, with wheeling fires sailing adrift on a dark sea, passing each other in aloof, lonely circuits.



The most popular girl's name had been Michelle the year Michelle Alice Smith was born.

Her mother, desirous that her daughter might be credentialed with a Proper English Name, chose with little thought to the thronging Michelles she was dooming her newborn child to be a part of. The long-term consequences of a lack of foresight became apparent in Michelle's schoolgirl years, when a combination of the commonness of both Michelle and Smith, and the cruelty of young girls forced into close proximity with little inclination to like one another, produced a Michelle arriving home in tears because the girls at school had started calling her 'Massy'.

Alice was reputedly the name of an aunt who had died on Michelle's father's side the year before her birth, although the record in the family tree showed that an Uncle Edward was the one deceased, and that there had not been an Alice for at least three generations. Still, no one said anything, since Michelle's grandmother was prone to bursting into tears at the topic, especially after a good drink, which she was fond of at Christmas and New Year's. No one liked upsetting grandma, although it was an even toss-up between the amiability of the old woman herself, and manoeuvres for a favourable position in the fast-approaching split of assets that would be detailed in her will.

A level of such coincidence, then the shared cheek of their subsequent and somewhat coerced exit from the club, could not help but produce more warmth than might have been felt otherwise between the two women. Few things produced as much camaraderie as the arbitrariness of an (almost) shared name, the uniting factor of a shared enemy, and the comedy of a shared absurdity.

"Can I interest you in a coffee?" Alice said to Michelle.

Michelle did not actually like coffee. She had never gotten into the habit of drinking it in her younger years and had developed a somewhat snobbish distaste for it after all her coworkers gradually fell into dependence.

This, however, did not seem important right now.

"Yes, sure," Michelle said, suddenly buoyant.

"Perfect, perfect." Alice laughed. "On me! What would you like?"

"I don't know," Michelle said, because she really didn't. "You decide for me."

She would have been far unhappier if Alice had expressed her distaste for coffee as well, and called for hot chocolate. She might have been afraid, then. Perhaps the spectre of her own identity, suddenly cut off from herself, would have risen before her and frightened her.

But, Michelle thought, tapping her chin with a pink acrylic nail as her eyes followed the old lady weaving her way through the coffee shop, she like coffee.

This was somehow reassuring to her. She felt suddenly extraordinarily close to Alice, as if her heart was stirring in love. There was an ecstasy she was falling into, a sort of rapture. Out of everyone in the world, she thought, she understood Alice best, and Alice understood her.

October day, a perfectly cool spring morning, with the sky drizzling down in watercolour mists of blue. There were flower buds on the boughs of the trees, and flower buds swaying on the lawns by the roadside. Even the weedy grasses making their cringing way through the cracks in the concrete sent up timid flowers, to be trod underfoot by the careless traveller. There were certain methods to these things. Rainy days were for funerals, and bright afternoons for weddings.

She's got a pink handbag, Michelle thought, looking at the weathered brown bag left on the seat, with a sort of reddish tinge to it in the slanting sun. Holding up her bright nails, she smiled.

Alice came back with two espressos. She set one in front of Michelle. The dark liquid pooled bitter in its cup.

"Drink up!" She didn't ask if Michelle liked it. All of these trivialities seemed unimportant, of course Michelle would like it, and even if she didn't what would it matter? Not when Michelle was so close to her, so similar...she recognised Michelle from her dreams (Alice never remembered her dreams), that was it. She recognised her soul as a partner to her own, and that was why she didn't ask Michelle about the coffee, but instead finished off her own in one delighted gulp.

Michelle sipped delicately at her coffee. It was bitter, which did not come as a surprise. She didn't like it, but that was not enough to dent her happiness.

It was a whole enterprise by then, two cogs that met and set the whole machine moving, when each by their lonesome would spin, impotent, in their places. Could Michelle have voiced her dislike then, and could Alice have asked? Perhaps, but I am inclined to disagree.

Alice Michelle Smith had been born Shen Jinrong, in Shanghai, to a well-off family who could afford to feed her, clothe her, and even get her a private tutor. She had lived her first years blissfully unaware of the existences of Alices or Michelles anywhere, memorising poetry and the four classics, and practicing penmanship,

calligraphy and rhetoric. She went on to finish a degree at university, although by that time her family had already fallen on hard times that only got harder. When her old mother died, the yet-to-be Alice sold the house, scraped together all her remaining funds, applied for a visa, and got on a plane.

Starting again from lower than she had ever been, she scrubbed pots, cleaned offices, stacked shelves, and took courses in English. Alice in Wonderland was the first English book she ever read cover from cover. The idea of being thrust into a strange world, running on dreamlike logic, seemed resonant in a way she didn't like to think too hard about. One of her co-workers told her during break that people tended to take people with middle names more seriously, and were more likely to think of them as well-off, affluent, and worth listening to. Her English teacher was a Michelle, a name as good as any, and one with more fondness than she was likely to regard the rest. Like a bird adorning a new nest, she plucked it up and tucked it into her woven walls.

She graduated, got lucky at an interview, found a place willing to take a chance. Working long hours, scraping by, saving and scrimping, darning her clothes with a sort of resentful haughtiness. The best years of her life faded into that greying monotony. She married a man with a last name of Smith, marrying him out of a terrified compulsion to spend herself before her value became defunct, like the coin of some dying civilisation. Dressed in the cheapest wedding dress she could rent, surrounded by strangers, the few acquaintances she had suborned to being her bridesmaids, victory was sour behind her teeth. She signed the certificates, lost her maiden status and the last of her name with it (not quite in that order).

At the ripe age of thirty-five, Alice Michelle Smith was born.

As they spoke, a waiter set down an ash tray and cleared away their empty cups. Neither were in the mood for eating.

“So what do you do?” Alice lit a cigarette and took a long pull. Tapping the ash off the side of the table, she exhaled. “You look young—a student?”

“No, no.” Michelle waved her hands. “I’m over thirty! I’m a software developer. I work at—”

“Don’t tell me!” Alice laughed. “If you do, I’ll tell you all about mine, and we might as well have stayed at the damn club. Why did I go to that club? It’s a good place for young girls like you, but I should have gone to a golf course, or a knitting circle—though I hate knitting and despise golf—but no matter what I shouldn’t have gone to that club. Do you want to go back, Michelle? I won’t fault you for it.”

“Not at all! I’m hardly young myself—though it might look that way to you.” Michelle paused, consternation flashing over her face before she barrelled ahead, earnest to cover the slight. “I didn’t want to be there in the first place. I won’t go back even if you get tired of me! I’ll wander around, I’ll buy myself a bubble tea, maybe I’ll get a pack of elastics, but I don’t think I’ll go back.”

“Oh, you should have told me!” Alice pulled back her sleeve, revealing a neat row of black elastic bands. Pulling one off, she offered it to Michelle.

While Michelle pulled her hair into a braid over her shoulder, Alice took another drag of her cigarette. The smoke pulled through the air, veil-like.

“How old were you again? Exact numbers. Don’t be embarrassed, you can hardly be outdoing me.”

Michelle laughed, snapping the elastic to test its tautness. Satisfied, she let the black rope of hair settle against her shoulder. Wisps were already starting to slide, the sleek straightness of it rebelling at shape.

“Thirty five.”

“Thirty five, thirty five. My daughter is thirty-five. Ah, to be thirty-five! I still feel it myself, though I’m sure I don’t look it.”

“It’s not much of an age to be, to be honest. I’m not young anymore, but I don’t want to settle into middle age. I went to that club, and I thought, I could keep coming to this same place until I die—no offence to you! But there’s so much of my youth that I still feel I could spend. Am I really thirty-five already? I feel more like seventeen. I feel a little like seventy-three.”

Alice laughed, as if she had been told a grand joke. She put out her cigarette with a vicious twist. “Trust me, it doesn’t get much better at seventy-three. Well, that’s life. Ah, looking at you is like seeing myself—but the order’s all wrong. Reversed, somehow. Isn’t it strange, that your hair is black and mine is white? Tell me, are the wrinkles on my face obvious?”

“Not at all!” Michelle shook her head, then peered closer. “It’s like a map,” she said at last, somewhat nonsensically. “Only on time instead of space. You have a daughter, you said? I thought that you might have children, you have a mother’s wrinkles.”

As they spoke, a waiter set down an ash tray and cleared away their empty cups. Neither were in the mood for eating.

“I looked up and saw a stranger sitting down next to me. I was afraid, I was



ready to be offended. Then you stuck out your hand—I thought to myself, I'll be polite, I'll do what it takes. But when you said your name! Then it was as if I'd known you for a thousand years. No-one in the world could have been dearer to me than you in that moment." Michelle ground her cigarette into an ashtray and exhaled the last of the smoke. It shimmered, mirror-like in the air. "Funny, how these things happen."

"Funny—you're right. I thought it was funny as well. It was why I went up to you in the first place, you know. Like the universe slotting into place. All this time I've been wondering where the punchline is, and there you were! I hope you don't mind my saying that, I don't mean it badly. Don't think that I mean anything badly, I simply wanted to laugh about something. Ah! Now, I thought, I can laugh with the rest with them. This is what it was all about."

"I was so sure there was no one else like me in the world," Michelle said suddenly, before covering her mouth. Her cheeks flushed.

"So sure?" Alice laughed as she did up the end of her braid. The wiriness of her thin white hair made the braid seem somehow stern, strict, and neat as a schoolteacher. "I am still sure. You are young still, but I am old. My heart beats one pace for every two of yours."

"But at the same pace all the same!" Michelle cried, impetuous. "You must have some inkling of what I felt—to see everything that I was, the same elements of it, built in someone else—even in another order—"

"Ah, I understand you." Alice said, no longer smiling. "It must have been the inverse of what I felt then. To see someone who existed so easily as everything I had built myself to be!"

As they spoke, a waiter set down an ash tray and cleared away their empty cups. Neither were in the mood for eating.

They exhaled the smoke in tandem. Alice dropped her cigarette and ground it beneath her heel. Michelle placed hers in the ashtray, watching as the last stub of it blackened and shrivelled. The smoke wove through the air, tunnel-like.

"What's in a name?" Michelle said suddenly. "A rose by any other name—well, you catch my drift."

Alice cackled. "Shakespeare! Not that! I have a passing familiarity with the man only. I know him as a business instead of a poet – but that is enough to catch your drift. Not by any other name, however! If you were a Theresa, I wouldn't have given you a second look."

“Not in any world would I have been a Theresa,” said Michelle. “I was born a Michelle Alice Smith, and with luck, that’s how I’ll die.”

“Yes, you were born to it. You know, I was born to a name too. Not this one, though. It’s quite the ship of Theseus. If I’d read *Jane Eyre* before *Alice in Wonderland*, and had an English teacher called Rose, and married a Bass instead of a Smith, you’d be talking to a Jane Rose Bass. Or I suppose you wouldn’t. Would you have talked to a Jane Rose Bass?”

“Not for anything in the world,” Michelle reassured her.

“See! By any other name—but I am glad that I didn’t turn to the right or the left. All these coincidences of construction, in a straight honing path to meet with the inevitability of your birthright – and what a punchline it’s achieved. I believe I have never met you before, but now I know I have worn your soul like a cloak for at least—what was it?—thirty-five years.”

“Only? It feels more like seventy-three. Before I was born, I must have been you. All those years you spent building, you built me.”

“It must be so—or perhaps it’s the other way around. You existed, and so I became you. Ah, what is my name now? Surely it is not Alice. Is your hair grey?”

“As grey as yours,” Michelle proclaimed. Their hair blew out, steel grey as an iron banner, in the sudden chill breeze.



Bloodlines

Elena Kaloudis

Content warning: gore, body horror, sexual harassment

5 nights until

The toothpaste foams around my mouth and I imagine I am a rabid dog that the townsfolk have to put down. I make a small growl and almost choke on the minty white foam. I spit the toothpaste out into the sink and look down to see pink and crimson swirls against the porcelain bowl. I am brushing too hard again. Maybe it's gingivitis. I grin widely to see all of my teeth and gums; a couple of teeth in the bottom row are bleeding. My dentist is going to be pissed.

Mum told me I had to get used to the sight of blood. She said I'd be seeing it a lot more now that my body was finally changing, and I was becoming a woman. All my life she's been telling me of the magical transformation. She even brought out a diagram when I was thirteen; that's a mental image I'll never forget. It made no sense to me, that I'd be a child one day and a woman the next all because of blood. I've got a job at Freebird Café on Sundays and my own bankcard, and I chip in for my phone bill. There's nothing more adult than working and paying bills.

When does a boy become a man? Probably his first erection or sexual experience, but where's the pain in that? Where's the goddamn blood.

I've been thinking about this for years, stewing on it, letting it fester beneath the surface. Watching the girls at school secretly pass tampons to each other during lunch breaks and boys like Joey and Nick sniggering at it. Christine wearing push up bras that clearly made her sore by the end of the day just so those same boys could leer at her.

Mum says that women have been brainwashed into seeing themselves as men see us. The more I thought about it the more I found it to be true. I saw it in every ad, model shot, TV show, and teenage girl. So many girls around me give into this charade, the act of womanhood according to men, myself included. I still have that pink lace push up bra I bought with Christine jammed into the back of my underwear drawer. There was a time when I wanted so badly to be like those other girls that were really women, I wanted to be passed a tampon in secret while the whispers of women grew around me, blocking out the laughter of boys pretending to be men.

Mum has been on edge for the past four years, hoping I am different from

the other women in our family. That I'd get it sooner and be normal. After each month passed, I could see the disappointment grow larger, until I started to feel like I was the disappointment. Only recently did that change, after I punched Joey right in the nose. He had tried to cop a feel in the middle of the school day, his arm around my shoulder and his hand hovering conveniently over my right boob. I saw the flicker of fear in his eyes as he saw the unexpected rage in mine. He howled and held his nose as the blood seeped through his fingers, and I felt a wave of pleasure at his pain. He tried to cover up his fear by calling me a 'psycho'.

Now I'm home for the next two weeks on suspension.

I stare at myself in the mirror and remember the rapid stream of dark blood that poured from Joey's nose, over his lips, and splattered onto his crisp, white school shirt.

Mum yells from the kitchen, "Maria! Come and have breakfast!"

I open the moon phase app and sync it with my calendar, setting up alerts before it reaches its peak.

The first time mum told me about the women in our family I was seven and she was slightly drunk after dinner. She knelt down in front of me and told me I had to understand the moon and follow its phases. Because one day it would control me, bringing in blood every month, just like it did for every other woman in our family. She used the words *late bloomers*. I pictured a flower unfurling and didn't think it would be so bad. I was only seven, what did I know of the hideous cycle?

"Maria! Hurry up!"

Fuck breakfast. I decide I'm going to watch cartoons all day and eat my weight in chips.

4 nights until

The hair is never-ending. No matter how many times I shave, it keeps coming back. Mum says its worse for us because we're so late, as if the hair had been trapped and waiting for its release. I made it all the way to Sixteen without a razor blade or wax strip. My hair before this was peach fuzz, inconsequential and unnecessary to remove. I would stroke it absent-mindedly for comfort. Now it's coming in with a vengeance. Thick, coarse, black strands of hair coming out of everywhere.

I woke one morning to Abraham Lincoln sideburns and hairy toes. In a fit of rage, I swung my arm and smacked the hello kitty lamp off my dresser, shattering it around me. Mum tried not to laugh and that only made my chest and face hot with

anger. I looked down at the shards of glass and wanted to aim one at her half smile, then she wouldn't find it so funny, but I quickly realised how violent and deranged the thought was and stayed silent out of guilt.

I could handle the physical stuff if my mood could just stay stable. Each day felt like a malfunctioning rollercoaster I couldn't get off and didn't particularly want to be on in the first place. If I woke up happy, by lunchtime I would be crying, and mid-afternoon would be a whirlwind of rage before settling into a lethargic state of melancholy before bed. It was driving me insane. Anger was the worst of it, it would take over so quickly and out of nowhere, so I had no chance to prepare myself or whoever that anger was aimed at. Mum would make one comment and I'd go flying off the handle, spitting poison and baring my teeth, not being able to control my tone or the spiteful words coming out of me. I struck at her softest parts and watched as my words sunk in. She stared at me hard and cold. Her nostrils flared and her lip twitched, then she was gone. She left me to stew in my rage and waited for the regret to lull me into silence.

After the anger had faded and sadness took its place, I came to her quietly, she was on the couch watching *House Hunters*. The look on my face softened hers, and she opened her arms to invite me in. I cried and cried until my cheeks were salty. She held me and said it was going to be okay, that this is what happens to women like us, and there was nothing we could do but learn to live with it. I cried harder at this admission of powerlessness, and the bitter tinge to her voice. I thanked her even though it was the shittiest pep talk she'd ever given. I stayed curled up next to her on the couch, just as I had when I was a child. Except now there was no popcorn or Disney, just the rise and fall of my mother's chest and the silence between us.

3 nights until

The smell from the kitchen transports me out of my cave. I float along the edge of it, biting into the air and following the delicious scent of fresh strawberries, vanilla extract, and cinnamon. It is heavenly and my stomach grumbles with violent delight. My mouth is watering when I enter the kitchen. Mum is humming some old tune and flipping the pancakes in the air. Without turning she speaks to me.

"So now that I'm cooking pancakes you want to eat breakfast, but yesterday when I made you porridge it was gross." I feel the muscle under my right eye twitch.

"Porridge is gross, so yeah."

She turns now and looks me in the eye, sizing me up. I know what she is seeing. My dark curls have transformed into wild frizzing tendrils. I'm more medusa than

Mediterranean. My eyebrows now meet in the middle and my dark circles that were once sleepy girl chic have become grey and deep-set. I pick at a crater that was once an unready pimple on my chin and feel the dried skin peel off to reveal fresh flesh. I touch the spot and see blood.

Mum looks at me sympathetically and slides a plate of pancakes over to me. They are perfectly round with just the right amount of maple syrup, ice cream, and fresh strawberries, and there's a sprinkle of cinnamon dusted over the top. I sigh into my breakfast, and my stomach growls impatiently. It is telling me to hurry up, get on with it, FEED ME. I eat them within five minutes and feel only a smidgen of satisfaction before the hunger rears upward on its hindlegs to scream for more.

Before I can ask for another plate, a particular scent overpowers me. I pause and breathe in deep from my nostrils and taste the tang of something rotten behind my teeth. For a moment I wonder if the strawberries are not so fresh and look at what is left of them on the counter. They are a vibrant red and free of any blemishes. My face scrunches as I smell it again. The scent is overpowering and lingers.

"What's wrong?" Mum says, noticing the confusion and disgust on my face.

I stand up from my seat at the table and walk around the kitchen, sniffing the air, inhaling the sour smell.

"I can smell something off."

It gets stronger as I get closer to the fridge. I yank the silver handle and stare inside at its contents. Sauces, cheeses, deli meats. Left over curry from last night. My nostrils flare as I breathe in deeply.

My eyes narrow in on something wrapped in paper, I grab it and almost gag from the smell that's so close now I can taste it.

"The meats gone bad. You should freeze it next time."

I throw it on the kitchen counter with a dense thud and walk back to my room, my mother's eyes watching me as I turn the corner down the hall.

2 nights until

I sit on the veranda steps, picking at the blossoming jasmine in the pot beside me. The white flowers shine in the darkness. Closing my eyes, I listen to the cicadas sing their song. The drone of it relaxes me. Mum sits on the rocking chair her father made her, its white paint faded but the curling vines and soft blue forget-me-nots still prominent. I used to trace the pattern of it when my fingers were much smaller; I close my eyes and drift in and out of thought. Mum breaks the peaceful quiet and tells me the moon is important to all women, not just us. This time I listen patiently, and she sees I'm open to her.

“We are all connected to its phases, the way it shrinks and grows, shifting between dark and full. Some women are out of sync with its phases because of hormones or the pill, but not us. It’s in our blood.”

I laugh at the irony and let her continue.

“Laugh all you want, but when that moon is big and round it’ll happen. Every month like clock-work. But don’t worry pup, we’ll go through it together,” she says.

I look up at it now and see its fullness. It’s not quite there, but almost.

1 night until

Mum tells me I need to get out of the house for a bit after my meltdown during lunch. I opened Instagram between bites of my sandwich to see Christine out with Lucia at the new laser tag place. She hasn’t even visited me once since I was suspended, and I told mum that I knew for a fact that Christine hates Lucia because she was bitching about her two weeks ago. I put down my sandwich and felt the heat rise in my face and the tears formed despite my clenched jaw. I let out a wail of frustration and landed my fist in my lunch. The soft bread held the indent of my knuckles and mum told me to go outside and come back when I’d calmed down. To be honest, I think she just wanted me out of the house for a while. I don’t blame her.

I walk my usual route down the street to the park with the pond and the cute ducklings. It isn’t huge but large enough to house a family that drifted along the water and ruffled each other’s feathers now and again. I turn a corner and a large, black German Shepherd barks behind a metal gate. I jump backwards at the sound and almost trip over my own feet.

My heart is pounding and my skin burns from the adrenaline, I look at the dog as it continues to bark and I am overcome with anger. Now my heart is racing for a different reason.

“How dare you bark at me when I was minding my own business. All I wanted was to walk past.” The dog looks at me with bared teeth as if I was going to kick it under the fence or steal its food. “I wasn’t even going to go near the gate! I was just walking to the park when you decided to puff up your chest and be all alpha.”

I’ll show him alpha.

I begin to growl deep and low, the sound coming from my stomach as I push, my muscles tensing. The bark comes out sharp and loud, layered with an aggression and dominance I wasn’t expecting. The dog quiets instantly and cocks its head to the left, as if it’s sizing me up and couldn’t understand what it’s looking at. On the veranda of the German Shepherds home, a man stands in stunned silence, staring at me

the same way his dog is. I can't handle being looked at that way, like I was some kind of crazy beast. I feel exposed out in the open like that. I tilt my head up and see the moon, it's a bright white against the fading blue sky, and almost full.

I turn around and run all the way home.

That Night

Mum and I sit on the scratched-up linoleum floor of the basement, our backs pressed up against the brick wall, and our knees resting under our chins. The washing machine is in the last throws of its final cycle. I watch the swirling water and clothes swish around. It is calming, and calm is what I need.

"You okay, pup?" Mum strokes my hair.

I look up at the padlock on the basement door, not wanting her to see my face. The chickens squawk in their cages and flutter frantically, leaving stray feathers floating around the floor. Mum had to drive an hour to Mr. Prichard's farm to get them. She says she only ever takes a few from the brood, and she makes sure they're old or sick, otherwise it's just cruel.

"I'm scared." I whisper.

She pulls me into a hug, "It's going to be okay. We'll go through it together, remember?"

I try to reply but a searing hot pain rips through my body. I scream and fall forward from the sheer force of it. As if some invisible hand is stabbing me in my gut and back and legs. I curl into a ball like I did as a child and shut my eyes, I call out for mum, but there is no response. I reach out for her and grab at nothing but air. The hurt swells again and my skin is aflame, tearing from my body. I am momentarily blinded by the pain when I hear an audible crack. I can't tell if it is coming from my body or mum's. I hear it again and realise it is her bones snapping, she is changing just as I am, and the sound is haunting. My spine shifts and bends under the skin, my nails elongate, and rip through the cuticle. I scream, and it is guttural.

All this time the chickens have been going mad, feathers are flying everywhere as they flap frantically to escape.

The moon is full now. I look down at my hands that are no longer hands but claws and dig them into the linoleum. A growl rises from my gut and reverberates through my chest. Mum is already on all fours, stalking her prey as it flutters helplessly away from her. I watch her devour it. The smell in the air is foul and the hunger pangs make me ache. I let it consume me.

The chicken's neck snaps between my teeth and I tear into my dinner. I am pure hunger and instinct, nothing more.

The Morning After

The early sun rises and shines through the small window near the ceiling, where the full moon once was. I am naked, bruised, and covered in chicken feathers and guts. Mum stands over me, concern in her eyes. I wobble and wince as she helps me to my feet, and I look down at the floor between my legs.

There is so much blood.



The Memory House

Laura Wrigley-Carr

The man smelled of iron and cedar.

That was all January could ever remember in the morning. There were glimpses of more—fragments of moments, tiny details traced in watercolours. His hand would smooth dust from a picture frame as he passed, its whorls of paint beneath his fingers. The twist of an expression: half-serious, half-jest, when he saw her waiting on the stairs.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” he would say, letting the door fall shut behind him.

“Are you Death?”

That was what she asked the man the second time she came. The man froze in the doorway, hand still on the knob.

It seemed logical to her. The way he smelled like the cedar chest her mother had stored their winter blankets in—that had to be what a coffin smelled like. His eyes were so alien, blue bleeding into white till only pale veins remained, like looking up into a shattered sky. He had to be Death; how else could he have known, that first night, what was wrong?

That her mother was curled up in a cedar chest in the ground. Asleep under a blanket.

The man shook his head to her question, still staring. “This place has nothing to do with death. It’s a library, made from truths—the ones you can only learn from experience.”

The memory house had white-smooth walls and shifting picture frames. The man took her through rooms she’d hardly noticed that first time, showing her how he could bring memories to life just by touching the picture frames.

“I’m the caretaker,” he explained. “I look after other people’s memories.”

January didn’t want to ask what he’d seen in hers.

It was the middle of the night, and all the lights were on downstairs.

January slid into her slippers and padded down the hall.

She found her dad at the kitchen table, staring into an untouched mug of coffee. Every lamp was on, the music playing loud, as if trying to wash away the overwhelming presence of someone who was not there.

In the morning, these solitary moments would be lost among the noise of the day: in talking and laughter and hurried shoes on the stairs. Her dad would draw smiley faces on her breakfast and joke about the burnt toast. But his smile wouldn't reach his eyes, and neither of them would acknowledge the empty chair at the table, just in case it played by the same rules as the space beneath her bed. In case this time there really would be a monster waiting.

As she lingered by the door, January wished the iron-paned windows would crack beneath the pressure of that room filled with sound.

Maybe that would let some of the quiet out.

The caretaker was already awake when morning came.

He watched the sun rise through the eyes of a hundred different people, the light creeping west, gathering fragments of memory in its wake.

It was always morning somewhere. People woke, ate, loved, sobbed, dreamed.

Is it beautiful yet?

The memory fragments always thought things were beautiful, even if the moment sang with nothing but loss and sorrow and pain. That was the logic by which the memory house had been made. It existed in the subconscious, a mindscape set adrift upon the teeming ocean of collective human memory because a millennia ago someone had believed there might be great truth in aggregating all there is to know.

That second visit, the memories had snuck up on him. For the longest moment the caretaker had seen his little brother in the girl waiting on the stairs.

He'd frozen, staring like an idiot.

He stood there and tried to explain the Greek concept of gnosis in simple terms while January perched on a step like it was the lip of a teacup, listening as if what he was saying actually made sense.

It was only after she'd left that the caretaker had realised that with her here, for once his mind had been still.

But that didn't matter. She wasn't supposed to be here.

He didn't care about the mission of the memory house. If there was one great truth to this broken world, he doubted it would be kind.

Someday, he would find the courage to let all the memories be forgotten. To sleep, finally, forever. The caretaker's hand lingered on the knob, weighing, thinking. No. Not today.

He opened the blank door, the fragments inside singing of the glory of the coming dawn. He was already awake when morning came. The caretaker was always awake.

There was one door in the house. The caretaker never mentioned it, but every time January came, she'd wait on the stairs for him, staring at that blank door.

She'd always had a problem with curiosity. It happened when she touched the knob. A crack in her mind, a sudden moment of understanding. It felt like waking up into a world drawn in different colours.

Vand didn't sleep deeply anymore. A rustle was enough to drag him back to consciousness, slumped fully clothed in the chair facing his little brother's room. The doctor had recommended constant supervision, so here he was. Just in case.

He sighed, scrubbing his hands across his face, and pushed himself out of the chair. The greying curtains had been torn back, forcing moonlight into every corner of the tiny motel room. Papers were strewn across the bed, with tiny black words crammed in like roving ants.

Render was curled in the centre, his ten-year-old hands stained with ink, his eyes like cracked blue pottery. Vand eased his brother out of the paper nest and settled them both on the end of the bed, fingers tracing slow circles on Render's hands.

"It's okay," he kept whispering, the promise like a prayer.

So many nights of scribbled words as he watched his brother slowly shatter, with no answers in sight. Once these attacks had been sporadic. Now it seemed Render barely touched the real world at all.

Even now, Vand's little brother almost looked through the hands that held his as he whispered, "Too much truth. Too many. They won't stop." He gulped down a sound, breathed deep for a moment. In, out. Shuddering breaths. "Can't get them out."

Vand swallowed, afraid that if he opened his mouth, all the fear and exhaustion and helplessness inside might come spilling out. He traced over Render's thin fingers, bleached white by the night.

"Tell me what you need, Rend," he begged. "Please. Tell me what to do." His fingers tightened around his brother's as if he could reach beneath the skin and tear out the truths that had left those shadows in his eyes.

"Show me how to reach you."

A blink, and January was back in front of the blank door, now bearing a picture of the two brothers etched in ink. The door opened, admitting the caretaker. For a moment he looked between her and the picture now fading on the door.

"Finished looking?" he asked.

She opened her mouth to apologise. "Who is that?"

The caretaker's gaze drifted over the picture with eyes like a shattered sky, like cracked blue pottery, and she already knew the answer.

The caretaker had not technically lied, but he should have just told her his name was Vand, instead of misleading her so he wouldn't have to explain. He should have made her leave by now. But every time she came, he saw Render in her eyes, and he didn't want her to go.

"Do you remember when I told you how people come here?" he asked.

Her dark eyes flicked up to his, then fastened themselves on the back and forth of her feet under her chair.

"You said that they needed a question," January answered.

More than that, really. A need to know so burning that the subconscious would follow the ancient paths of memory to find the answer. Of course, she knew hers. It had been in her mind that first time she'd come.

The silence stretched between them, thick with words.

Still watching her swinging feet, she said, "I don't know how to fix him."

Each word was controlled, carefully enunciated as if breaking it down might bring a solution.

"There isn't an answer here that will satisfy you," the caretaker said quietly.

"Sometimes all you can do is love someone and hope that's enough."

Her feet had slowed as he talked. She searched his face. "How do you know?"

If he'd had any kind of courage, the caretaker would have been honest. Instead, it was technically true to say, "My brother taught me that."

Now. Do it now.

"You need to leave."

Too forceful. Take a breath. Explain. "You're not supposed to be here. This place is dangerous. I don't want you to accidentally discover something you can't forget."

Calm words—that was the hardest part. Calm words for something that frightened him beyond belief. After all, gnosis referred to truth you could only learn from experience.

There were truths in the bones of this house the caretaker would give anything to have taken away.

In the space of a blink, January was gone, and the caretaker was alone again. For a moment, he cast an eye around the room, settling himself on the step. The blank door, the ever-present picture frames, the stingrays he'd imagined for January on the ceiling. He'd made them dance that first night she'd come, had searched through the ocean of memories and filled this place with the best of them: moments of wonder and music and peace. He'd let her forget for a while that her world had fallen apart.

It was good she had left. January would be alright now. She would wake and grow up and live.

The caretaker exhaled, trying to find peace in the silence. Maybe this time he could weather the coming storm without the blank-doored room. Maybe he'd be able to remember who he was among the truths of thousands of lives he'd never lived.

The last thing the caretaker saw before the fragments struck was the blank door, its silver knob gleaming like pale fingers in the night.

Love and joy and peace and pain, a thousand years in every breath.

—so she took that final step—

—his bloodied fists tore at the earth, hoping, wishing—

—they prayed as the wave towered—

—beneath the smog, she could hear them drowning—

—and the darkness could not overcome—

—there was nothing, nothing left—

They wouldn't stop. He couldn't breathe. His own memories were wavering, cracking, shredding themselves among the others. Too much truth, too many.

He had to get them out.

He lurched forward, hands scrabbling for the doorknob. The blank door clicked shut behind him.

Vand let himself slide to the floor as the storm slowly abated. Opening his eyes, he drank in the pictures that lined the walls. Render looked out at him from every one, a life bottled up and catalogued.

The memories had withdrawn into background noise. For now.

He was so tired and wondered why couldn't he just leave this place behind. It would be so easy to release the fragments that threatened to wash away all that he was. To finally forget, to sleep forever.

But then Rendar would be just a name long forgotten.

The thought filled Vand with panic. He ran from it, tried vainly to ground himself here, with a blank door and a room full of reminders of someone worth remembering.

It was pathetic, he was pathetic, to cling to these scraps of memory with such desperation... but what else could he do? It was all he had left.

Almost reflexively, unwillingly, he reached out to the nearest picture frame. A tear-stained face by a silent bed filled his vision.

"Why?" Rendar demanded. "Why do you always insist on saving everybody except yourself?"

January dreamed she was drowning in molten glass. It was all around her, flowing ever inwards, every twist and crack filled with memory. The feeling of it was familiar now: a dream-that-was-not-a-dream, like if she just opened her eyes a little wider, millennia might come rushing in.

She fell with the current into its centre, and suddenly she was living through someone else's eyes. Trapped in the glass, huddled in his own memories, he tried to escape the ocean.

Truth, truth, truth. Every moment rang with it; every moment drowned in it.

Vand had constructed his memories well.

In the pictures on the walls, Rendar was a boy with bright eyes and hair like dandelion fluff, who once learned dragonflies could see more colours than humans and insisted on telling everyone he knew. But with the glass rushing by, those fragments of memory were twisted up with the rest: ink on sheets and moon-stained pages as Vand begged his little brother to let him in.

Show me how to reach you.

The light and joy Vand clung to was always cracked by Rendar's halting words dropping into the space between them.

His brother wasn't there when Vand arrived. Instead, an olive-skinned woman waited, her cracked eyes thoughtful as Vand begged.

She sat cross-legged on a table and explained. The memories needed a new caretaker, and it was supposed to be Render. He had to let him go. The woman tilted her head, purple eyes threaded with white like a painted spiderweb, asking how much he was willing to give.

Everything.

And Vand meant everything, because it hurt too much to do nothing, because he couldn't take another day of watching Render waste away.

Because he couldn't let his little brother go, even if Render asked him to.

The caretaker let him take the gnosis: all of it, all at once, because any slower might be too late. Vand let the ocean of memories swallow him.

He was falling through time, back and back and back till it seemed it would never stop.

—the woman named her baby—

—and Theophanes hoped he'd live to see the gnosis coalesce—

—they thought they could climb to the sun—

—the fire kindled in the deep—

—and now that sound had meaning—

And then there was no sound. For a moment, nothing happened.

It was the beginning, and the earth was formless and empty.

His eyes didn't open so much as crack.

Suddenly

he

saw

everything.

Is it beautiful yet?

His vision split into halves, sixteenths, hundreds, thousands, and somewhere amongst everything he could hear the caretaker shouting, screaming at him.

focus. Focus. FOCUS!

He watched a thousand times as the cracks in Render's eyes healed, just in time to see Vand stagger to his knees. He felt his irises fracture between times, but he knew it was alright.

Everything would be alright.

No matter what he forgot, this moment he would always remember: his little brother sitting up, eyes on him, afraid but unhurt. Render was safe, Render would live.

And to the boy who for a moment had forgotten his name, that was enough.



When Vand opened his eyes, the blank-doored room was silent. He could feel dawn coming. It was always morning somewhere.

Centuries ago, Render had asked Vand to let him go, and every day since, Vand had tried. He'd stood in the memory of the new dawn and asked: What do I do if after hundreds of years I still don't feel ready to let you go? How long do I need to live before it's okay to choose to die?

Vand was not alone. January sat beside him, back against the wall, tapping her socked feet against each other. She gave an unsteady smile when she noticed him watching, tried for the caretaker's half-joking tone as she said, "You're not supposed to be here."

She knew. And she was right: maybe this was enough. Maybe now he could finally sleep.

Vand let his head rest against the white wall. "I know."

He was so, so tired.

January rested her head on his shoulder. "I wish I could make stingrays on the ceiling for you, too."

He smiled at that. After a while, his eyes slid closed.

As he drifted off, Vand could feel her fingers tracing slow circles on his hand.

"It's okay to fall asleep," January was saying. "When the morning comes, I will remember you."

January opened her eyes to a pale, reluctant dawn and an empty house. There were no words to make the quiet in its walls disappear, but that was okay.

When her dad came to wake her up, January pulled him into a hug.

She didn't need words.



Sister Speak

Shaye Easton

This tree here, my grandma tells me, patting its bark like you might pat a friend's shoulder, is as old as I am. My grandma's wrinkled hands, the protruding blue veins and various oblong sun spots. The tree's bark, rough and dark, and full of ridges like little dry rivers awaiting rain. She tells me they were born on the same day, and I believe her.

So it's your sister, I say. I am five.

Yes, she tells me. My twin.

Every summer I spend two weeks at my grandma's house and that summer I spend most of it under the tree. I put all my toys at the base of its trunk, in among the roots, like offerings. I call it Great Aunty and tell it stories, some true but most fiction. I tell it about school, the endless strings of multiplication and division problems our teacher sets for us in the bleary mornings. About the grey-blue stone I found in the sandpit one lunchtime, how it shined under the jealous gaze of my friends. About the scolding I get from my mother each afternoon when she sees the dirt caked under my nails and the blisters on my palms. *I climb trees like you easy, I say. I climb trees even bigger.* I whisper to it the names of my rivals and share my plans for playground retribution. I ask it to look over my friends. In the long afternoons I stretch out under its shade and softly speak my dreams. I pretend Great Aunty is listening. After two weeks, I believe it.

In the early days my grandma sits outside with me. She makes us iced tea and props a chair up in the shade to read. Sometimes she'll read aloud to me or ask me vaguely about school, but mostly we're quiet, content in each other's company. Whenever she goes inside, Great Aunty starts whispering. *Shh, I tell it. Don't talk about Grandma behind her back. She'll hear you.* At this age the words are just a game, the tree my pretend partner in crime. In a few years, however, my grandma no longer leaves the house.

Like a detective hunting for clues, I am tempted into memory of this time: the soft breeze, leaves chattering, sunlight poking through as little bright flashes, as tiny stars in a green firmament. Days passing like years. The grass poking at my skin where I lay, bearing me aloft into dreams. Sometimes the smell of a barbeque. Sometimes the world blueing in the shadow of a cloud. Sometimes the neighbour's golden retriever scratching at the fence, in yearning. But always the tree, her roots twining around my head like a dozen protecting arms. And always the whispering of her leaves, an ancient language which I imagined I understood—or perhaps truly did.

I didn't see my grandma watching from the window, but I know now that she was, with a cup of tea, the radio on, and a tattered copy of Calvino's *The Baron in the Trees* laid out on her lap. For years I lay under the cool shade of her sister, and for years she watched from behind a pane of glass, as though afraid.

In high school I excelled in English. We read *The Great Gatsby* and the language is so poetic I can almost hear Great Auntie whispering in its pages. I am drawn to poetry, that of Mary O:liver and Emily Dickinson and Percy Bysshe Shelley. A second-hand copy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* becomes to me a sacred object; I read it before bed, underline and scribble notes, and store it under my pillow for good dreams. It is not so much the stories that interest me but the words.

At university I major in English but find it unfulfilling. My peers point out how the author's sentence subverts historical attitudes or emphasises this or that core theme. I do not care about the sentence. The sentence tells me nothing. In a poetry class we talk about metre, the inherent rhythm of words. For a while I am intrigued. Then we're broken up into groups and told to put words into order, so they march without freedom or feeling. *The natural music of language*, our teacher says after, when each group presents their verses. It does not sound natural to me.

In my second year, I enrol on a whim in a linguistics course. I learn that meaning does not end with words. Each is made up of smaller elements, of morphemes and phonemes. I have the feeling I've broken through a ceiling I once thought was the ground. Then I look down at my feet.

Some weeks later I get a worried call from Mum. Grandma is in the hospital. She had a fall. Your dad and I are heading there now. Where are you?

The hospital is an awful place. A place of peroxide and bare walls, like they've tried to scrub the nature out. Mostly Grandma's asleep, but every now and then her lips will tremble, like she has something she wants to say but her body won't allow it. Dad gets us all coffee and Mum takes hold of her hand. Her skin is pale and slightly shiny. Her eyes are ringed in deep shadow. *She was carrying tea from the kitchen to her chair by the window*, Mum tells me.

She just tripped?

She's getting old, honey.

Hours later a couple words finally break free: *I'm falling*— she gasps into the quietness of the twilight. Followed ten minutes later by: *Stop*—

Mum shushes her and gently strokes her forehead. I feel sick and tell them I'm going for a walk.

In the car I let my body drive. I think about the syntax trees, hundreds of them, I've drawn in my notebook. All the sentences I've chopped up and divided out into increasingly elemental forms. All the words I've torn apart for their roots. The language I've sliced into pure meaning. Meaning into arbitrary sound. No matter how I cut and dismember, nothing dangles at the end of the line. Language is a rabbit hole to nowhere. I am Alice in an infinite fall, and Grandma is there with me, I know.

My grandma's house slides into the frame of the side window. The car comes to a halt. In no time at all I am standing before her table. Puddles of tea are still drying on the floor.

In the yard it is autumn. Leaves like dead, dissected words float through the air. Phonemes shiver at the end of each branch—snap, fall, flip brittle across the grass. Humanity built language only to break it for understanding. Trees understand this cycle. They, too, know how to kill what they love.

I look up at Great Aunty where she sways but cannot whisper. I hope for an answer. Her bare branches twist like a tongue about to unfurl a word, but all I hear is the wind passing through them. I am not a child anymore and there is no imagining: I do not understand.

In my dreams when I touch the tree, the bark grows over my fingers. It spreads over the back of my hand and then, as though it hungers for my body, starts tracking up my arm, wood encasing skin or perhaps skin becoming wooden, hardening, pores turning to grain, wrinkles darkening into small fissures. I do not stop it. It consumes my arm, my chest; it makes my legs into stilts. I feel I am learning something. But just as the bark is about to roll over my head and complete the transformation, I wake up.

My eyes blink open on my desk, a little animated light bouncing around the darkened screen of my laptop. Printed articles and pages of handwritten notes lie haphazardly over the scratched wood, half-hidden under empty cups of coffee, sometimes tea. I was dreaming of Great Auntie again. This time she did not come to me as a tree but as a person, the doppelgänger of my grandmother. She reached out to me with a gnarled hand to stroke the side of my face, but when she opened her mouth to speak, all that emerged was the sound of the wind in the leaves.

Do trees speak? We know they communicate with one another through mycorrhizal networks—an underground relationship between tree roots, for which fungi provide the bridge. They protect one another, send out warning signals, funnel nutrients to their neighbours. They shoot signals through the air. They use no words, have no thoughts, but messages are transferred through chemicals. We would not call this language, but then, we are not trees.

I look through the articles on my desk again; once again skim the notes I've compiled over the last few years. My thesis is mostly complete—an eighty-thousand word comparative analysis of birdsong and human language. What commonalities exist between the speech of the Kaya tribe and the call of the blue-backed tanager which inhabits the forest of their origin? And what can they tell us about the development of language? Through analysis of the bird's song, I found repetitive and distinguishable patterns. Some of these patterns we hear only at certain times of the day. Others appear at random. Two birds on opposite sides of the rainforest will sing the same vocal arrangements. We know the birds are communicating with one another, but how did they decide on these utterances? What do they mean? And what is the significance of some of these vocal patterns repeating in the Kayan language?

As the deadline for my research approaches, I have been thinking more and more of my grandma and her ligneous sister. I read over my work and feel that something is missing—and more than that: I feel that I've made a mistake. I can't shake the thought that somewhere among these pages is a fatal flaw. I recall an afternoon spent at grandma's when I was still young, perhaps ten or eleven. It was in winter. My parents had been held up and instead she collected me from school. I remember the thick grey clouds, the stillness of the air, how empty the streets looked as we drove.

My grandma's house was dark. She did not turn on the light but sat me down by the window and made tea. I gnawed on a selection of Arnott's biscuits and listened to the clock, bored but not bored enough to pull out my homework. When she came over with the pot she asked about my day. Besides *Hey there*, it was the first thing she'd said all afternoon—not unusual for her. I told her we'd been given an assignment for class. It was to interview an elder.

Do you know who you're going to interview?

I shrugged. Grandma looked out the window, her face pale grey in the winter light. She was looking at the tree. Its limbs were bare and desaturated and so thin at the end they seemed to dissolve into the overcast sky. An idea trembled on her bottom lip, then evaporated. She turned to me and said, *Why don't you interview me?*

I collect some pages and my laptop, and pack myself into the car. There is a thought I haven't let myself think but it's there, waiting; I can feel it like a thread of electricity in my body. It snakes around, seeking release.

When I arrive at my grandma's house I find the front door open. The spring wind blows down the darkened hall. *Grandma?* I call. A breeze sweeps back out in response. I go after its origin and discover the back door is open as well. The house is a funnel for air. I stand in the doorway, in the inhale and exhale of the world's airways, and survey the yard.

Grandma sits on the grass before the tree, staring up at it like I did as a child. Her back is to me but I get the sense that she's speaking. Above, Great Aunty whispers in stops and starts, her new leaves straining to be heard.

I am halfway to my grandma when she turns. She doesn't look surprised to see me but gets to her feet slowly, shakily. *What are you doing?* I ask her.

She smiles weakly. *Oh, just talking with an old friend.* I move towards her, lend her my hands. Her skin is paper thin, her bones brittle and delicate. She takes hold of both my forearms, her grip firm.

The tree? You can understand it?

My darling, she says, so did you. Behind her the wind tosses the leaves again, as if to add to the conversation, but I still do not understand.

She always told me your stories, Grandma continues. What she knows, I know, what I know, she knows. For a long time it frightened me.

You share knowledge with her? I ask. Like a mycorrhizal network?

My grandmother blinks at me. We speak to each other.

I shake my head. But how? Why? What is the point of all of this? Where does it end?

Now it is her turn to frown. But you already know.

Inside Grandma once again makes us tea. Her movements are slow—so slow. I offer to help but, stubbornly, she shoos me away. Instead I sit at her table by the window and open my laptop. Somewhere on my hard-drive is that interview, now almost two decades old—words I'd forgotten, having barely understood them at ten:

Q: What is the greatest lesson life has taught you?

A: That all things are connected. That connection has no beginning or end, but forms a circle.

Grandma once again brings round the pot. *And how was your day?* she asks me.

Now each night I sit in bed and trace etymologies on my laptop screen, from English to Old English, to Old French, through Greek and to Latin, and eventually, always, to Proto-Indo-European. No matter which route I take or how far back I trace, the trail dies out. But I know it must go further, have origins time has forgotten. Edward Sapir argued that any connection between language and environment is purely correlational. If the environment had any influence, it was only on which words entered the vocabulary and which didn't—a rainforest community, for instance, would have no word for the desert sands. This theory feels inadequate.

When you break down a word into its meaningful units, or its discrete sounds, we find ourselves at a dead end: there is no further division to be made, no next step to take. But language has no beginning or end—it is ever-evolving, continuous, interconnected. Its edges are ambiguous: they blur and spread out into the world; they reach back through time—as well as ahead. Over many years a language breaks itself apart and trades with others. But why should it trade only with human languages? Before there was speech there were the birds of the forest. Before Proto-Indo-European there was a woman, new to standing and shy on her feet. A woman looking up at a tree and listening.

The day Grandma dies I find myself back at her house, drawn there by some mix of intuition and dread. For a while I walk around aimlessly, picking up her various belongings and putting them back down. I can feel Great Aunty out in the yard but can't bring myself to go to her.

It is not until the early evening that I finally make my way outside. It is summer. The sun still hangs in the sky. Everything is warm and green and buzzing. But my grandma's twin is grey, still, her bark brittle, her leaves collapsed at her feet. Only one leaf remains, small and quivering at the end of a low branch.

Like my grandmother did all those years before, I place my hand on the bark of her sister. As if it had been waiting for me, the little leaf snaps and falls, drifts over my head. I catch it in hand: the final message.

Or, at last, the first.


Wingless Eros

Nicole Cadelina

All that is solid melt unto you, O Lord—
from dust unto dawn, let us lead
our ankles into a darkly caress, as we
warm these marble floors with the
linen limbs that weave into tapestry

There it is now:
you find your way
to slip these fingers
into swollen skins.
These hands will
throb to a tempo that
cures stray lovers—and
I tell you twice, no, no,
the craters are watching
 you sin tonight


But you tell me about
that Virgo moon: she remains
complacent as these coupled angels
perve at our reddish love. And then,
you tell me to christen thee as



you carry this hand
 that guides the way
to a damp limb
below the waist;
make less haste
 as I spoil it
with a soft palm
 beneath the wool—
under that fabric, it is there
 I find a tender wood...

Forgive me, dear comrade, for I
will lead our future to failure. You
will age a decade from now, and this
unfired vessel of mine will bore
you out of wedlock, and before long,
our braided veins will untwine, you
will cuss my name out of tuneless habit,
and I will be appointed heir to Job
after you peck this sunken overbite,

and this hand—
 a soon-to-be
empty clasp that
 contours the
knuckled hands
 of nobody



So I will tell thee—
it is enough to keep our fingers
knitted; to pray in this mighty
quietude; to wake the sleeping
spirit beneath us; to listen to
your ribboned whispers
under your olive breath;
to sample your lips
for the kindest
of kisses

But alas—it must be safer
to swallow that silence too.

Space Case

Eloise Wajon

Content warning: anxiety

Before I was pregnant, I'd spend hours looking at myself in the mirror, trying to figure out where my body ended and *the real me* began. Since I gave birth, I haven't lost much weight. I wasn't skinny to begin with, but my body fat has softened and spread, like butter left on the counter overnight. My body sags more, my breasts and stomach droop. I tell myself I just got closer to the earth's centre of gravity when I had Nora. I'm a recovered space case, a returning astronaut. I know more than I did before, but when I sit in my mother's group, I think that I still don't know what *they* know. Nora is almost one; soon the group will spread apart, stretch itself out like a rubber band, and I will be etched in their memory as the introverted, youthful mother and that's probably the best way they could think of it.

The hallway shakes with the sound of bells jingling on the wreath as Pete unlocks the door. I put on a t-shirt and go to greet them.

"Our subject has gained new vocabulary," Pete says. We have a silly role play where we pretend Nora is a newly identified species, and we're scientists studying her: Genus *Noraboratinous*. She is dressed in her duck sweater and smiling like a fool, blissfully unaware of this little game.

"What did you say?" I jokingly admonish her, as if she's a friend prone to cruel behaviour.

"Duck. I swear she tried to say duck." Pete takes off his hat and hangs it on a Command hook near the door.

"Are you sure? She only said her first word a few weeks ago, and it was ball." It was actually closer to 'boar', but Pete was at work, and all I could think was boar is a pretty shitty first word.

"It sure sounded like it. She said something starting with *duh* but just the one time, and really quietly...and..."



Pete erupts with excitement, swivelling Nora towards him so her eyes meet his. “Dada! She said Dada! I get to choose the restaurant for next date night.”

I fake groan, concealing a giggle. “This was a rigged bet from the beginning. The *muh* sound is harder for babies to grasp than the *duh* sound.”

“Who cares? You lost!” Pete raises Nora in the air and begins to chant *duh!* *duh!* *duh!*

“Fine. Do I get veto power, though? Maybe we can go out somewhere on New Year’s. Just not a restaurant?” I quickly try to amend this. He’s silent, for a moment.

“No, no. It’s Nora’s first New Year’s. I bet she’ll hate the fireworks too, he says, looking at me with a rueful smile.

Christmas really confused me as a child. I liked receiving presents as much as the next kid—but there was a mythos to the holiday season, some appeal to a greater good that forced my parents and I into our dusty little Mitsubishi on the 24th, every single year. We’d drive all the way up the coast to visit family I wasn’t sure we liked, and, with the car radio blaring Christmas music, we all fought, and cried and breathed kind of funny in the late December heat.

I was deeply perplexed by the song ‘Last Christmas’, and under that sweltering, mind-melting, sunlight I’d visually construct just what it meant to give someone your heart. I’d see it all in claymation, like *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, the VHS tape my parents would pop on when we reached our destination. A man would reach his four-fingered fist into his jumper, and pull out an anatomically correct heart, made of red and blue and purple plasticine. There would be no blood, no carefully handcrafted flesh or bone. The hole in his sweater would immediately fill up and flatten out, as if it’d never been there at all. He’d hand his heart to another man, who looked identical to him except for a different coloured jumper. The heart would pulse and expand and contract, and the man receiving this gift would gasp in delight, hastily accepting the hunk of flesh into his own hand. The gift-giver would finally exhale the breath he’d held onto, and grin as he realised that it was enough.

To think after all that, after he tore into his own body, after the animators meticulously moved through the whole scene, frame by frame he’d just give that heart away? It was deeply illogical to me.

It was just slightly past the onset of puberty I caught onto the fact that George Michael was using a metaphor to describe emotional commitment and not literally tearing his heart out. I think back to that little scene as I go through the motions of buying presents, losing war after war against a roll of wrapping paper, and loving a family I don't like. I wonder whether everything I am, everything I'm giving, is enough.

Today is the 14th of December—the last feasible day for Christmas shopping. After the 15th, it is too crowded, too loud, too much.

Pete pulls the car to a stop and takes the keys out of the ignition, shutting off the radio.

“We’ll be in and out in an hour and a half. Two hours, tops.” Pete holds my hand and strokes it with his thumb.

I wonder whether his understanding is beginning to wear thin. It’s just a shopping centre, and I treat it like the ninth circle of hell.

As we move in tandem, pulling Nora out of her carseat and fastening her into the Baby Bjorn, I watch him in the corner of my eye. He does everything so gently. My recurring nightmare strikes me, gently this time, thank God—if he were sick of the way I am, would I even know before all his things were packed into rental boxes and stacked in the driveway, leaving our house bare and haunted by a great love I’d merely imagined?

“Your headphones, m'lady.” Pete pulls them over my ears.

“Thank you.” I try to smile and not look so worried.

I know everyone hates the fluorescent lights of the shopping centre, and the spearlike, artificial rays of sunlight they inflict. Everyone hates the sound of people talking over Mariah Carey’s vocal gymnastics. And of course, everyone really hates crowds, the indiscriminate floods of people going every which way, giant clumps of humans moving unpredictably. But they all cope and filter it out somehow. I have no idea how to. I try to be somewhere else, in some other universe where the only lights are distant stars, and the soothing sound of silence rings in my ears—but I just can’t get away.

The equation goes like this; all of the above, plus just one little thing. Maybe I drop a product, receive a passive-aggressive text from my mum, or maybe Nora cries. Then my composure shatters like glass, and I go into a meltdown.

I might weep, or take a deep plunge into a dissociative state, where every word, action or social cue must swim through a dark sea to reach my brain. Years ago, I stood in the kids' section of Target, motionless and staring at the floor for hours. Eventually someone called security, and I lied and told the guard I didn't know what was wrong with me. The truth, being that sometimes I think I would like to be sucked into a black hole, a gravity-borne cocoon where no light, noise or sensation could reach me, was too severe. But when he sighed and simply told me he'd seen worse, I wondered whether I could have been honest with him. It was a low point.

To prevent something like that from happening, I reduce the sensory inputs that push me to the edge—so when I experience some type of emotional injury, it doesn't push me over. I put on the earphones and pick up something to fiddle with.

Sometimes, I'm too damn vain to do these things and I convince myself that I am normal enough, I just need to try harder—leading a lamb to an all-too-familiar slaughter. But since I had Nora, I try harder to take care of my needs, so I can take care of hers. Me and my girl, braving the hostile universe that is a Westfield in mid-December.

Pete was right. We should be out in less than two hours if my mother responds to my texts and tells me if she meant a specific kind of 'detox tea'. After years of disappointment, we've learnt not to surprise each other in my family, and I don't want to start again by making the wrong selection at the health food store. There's lemon, peppermint, rosebud, all meant to detox different parts of your body. Maybe I should get a few.

"Pip! Hello, hi!" I feel a brush on my shoulder.

Kaitlyn looks different than usual. She's wearing unevenly applied, thick makeup—but it's failing to conceal the dark circles under her eyes—and holding onto the handle of her shopping basket a tightly. Kaisyn, two months Nora's junior, is staring at me with his mother's eyes.

I ask her how she's been, trying to make eye contact and hide the fact I don't want to see her two hours before I am scheduled to.

“Oh, I’m well, thank you, I’m quite well. Oh, look at Noraaaaa! So sweet, so healthy.” She begins to pet Nora on the head. I tense up. I don’t like that she’s doing that. “She is healthy, isn’t she?” she smiles at me.

“What is healthy?” I say with a light chuckle, trying to figure out what her fixation on it is. Her smile drops.

“We’d better get going. See you this afternoon!” She breaks her eye contact and turns around hurriedly. My cheeks flush as I try and figure out what the right thing to say was there. Why wouldn’t Nora be healthy?

When the deed is done, the three of us sit in the car, exhausted and sore. I held it together, even when Nora needed a feed and I had to pop into the parent’s room, which due to the copious amount of air freshener they use to cover the stench of dirty nappies, has a uniquely foul smell, like someone shat on a pile of potpourri.

We arrive a little bit late, mostly due to the fact I don’t really enjoy the group. I continue to attend the meetings for Nora’s sake—so she can socialise before I go back to work and send her to daycare, hurling her into the deep, dark universe that lies beyond me.

I enter with Nora half asleep and hanging off my neck, clearly unwilling to detach and stack blocks as the hour requires. I wrestle her off and place her on the ground, attempting to soothe her with four of the blocks, a stuffed animal and finally placating her with a teething biscuit. I exchange brief pleasantries with a few of the mothers, going round the seated circle with relative ease.

Kaitlyn doesn’t acknowledge me when I arrive. She doesn’t seem to be acknowledging anyone. She stares intently at Kaisyn as he holds onto the blocks, examining them, brushing his little fingers over the corners and edges. She sighs deeply and stacks the blocks in a tower in front of him.

“Can you do that? Can you do that for Mummy?”

Her voice is strained and pitchy as she tries to guide the block in his hand on top of the tower. He isn’t letting go, and as repeats the words over and over she begins to cry. The room falls silent for a moment, but soon the group rushes over to comfort her.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. Didn’t mean to spoil the mood.” Kaitlyn wipes the tears from her eyes.

"It's just—" she mumbles into the shoulder of a hug. "Kaisyn isn't stacking, and he hasn't said anything but mama and doggie yet...and his doula thinks we should get him checked out for autism."

She whispers the last word like it's the name of a disgraced relative.

"I did everything right," she wails. "I breastfed: I'm still breastfeeding! I never fed him processed baby food, or cow's milk. I shouldn't have fed him meat and I know I shouldn't have fed him meat, but I thought it would be fine just once..."

The mothers crowd in around her with their kind words and pats on the back, carefully choosing their places so Kaitlyn can be fully cushioned by goodwill. I stand still, observing, feeling ill.

Kaitlyn is weeping like she's at a funeral, holding onto Kaisyn, caressing his little head as if he's sick to the bone.

I have a few minutes until she's alright again and the group's attention scatters. I have a few minutes to get *the fuck out of here*.

Swiftly, I scoop up Nora and my nappy bag and make my way to the door. I wonder if I'll ever come back.

I'm trying to hold onto my composure as I put Nora in her car seat. I know I'm going to cry when I sit in the front seat, next to Pete.

"Hey, hey," he closes his laptop and shuffles it into his bag, moving in to hug me. "What's wrong?"

I get terribly congested when I cry, and so I try to suck the snot on my face back into my nose and say, "Kaitlyn. Thinks her damn kid has autism, 'cos he's not building skyscrapers and giving motivational speeches yet. Kaisyn's *younger than Nora*."

Pete looks on sympathetically and pats my shoulder, but he doesn't say anything. I'm okay with that for now, while I try to count my breaths.

I always had to try really, really hard not to flinch when they rubbed the ultrasound goo onto my belly—the texture, temperature and sound all added up to my personal sensory nightmare. The whole process felt like an extra-terrestrial exploration, and

even though I knew better, sometimes I couldn't shake the feeling there was an alien inside me. But that day, I was so absolutely elated to find out the sex of the baby, I didn't mind. The pregnancy itself was all the surprise I needed, possibly for the rest of my life. Pete and I waited with bated breath as the sonographer tried to get the angle right.

"It's a girl!" the technician finally exclaimed. I was happy either way, but I just wanted to know well ahead of time. "And she looks very healthy!"

I couldn't control my grinning, and neither could Pete as he held my hand. We were so happy.

As she wiped the gel off my belly, the technician went through a few more routine questions about antenatal testing and further ultrasounds.

"Do you guys have any questions for me?" she said, and I was sure we didn't.

"Yeah, actually," Pete said. "Are there antenatal tests for autism?"

The technician's demeanour changed. "No." She stated, "Since we're not sure of the exact cause of autism, we can't really test for it in the womb. You just need to be really *careful*...and watch out for developmental delays...if that's, you know, a *concern*, I have some pamphlets you can take."

"Okay," he replied. "No, I'm all good. Just curious."

He smiled at me like nothing had changed, as if my heart hadn't just plummeted into the pit of my stomach. On that drive home, I was quiet. I hated the way she said we needed to be careful, and that it was a concern. I hated the way her face dropped, and her tone got serious. I hated that he asked.

"Why did you ask her that? About autism?" I said plainly, breaking the silence.

"It's like how you wanted to know the sex...no surprises, you know? I thought you would want to know, too."

I nodded. "Would you leave if she was?"

He didn't respond right away; I could tell he was shocked.

"No. Of course not. You don't think that, right?"

"No, well—I don't know. I know how hard it is for you, dealing with me...and I wonder if you would...or will, all the time." At that point, tears were beginning to well in my eyes.

"Pip, I only think about how hard it is for you."

"No, I just think you don't get it!" I wailed as I buried my head in my hands and cried violently. I'd really done it. I'd made a mess of what was supposed to be a beautiful moment.

That night, I cried in our bed until I couldn't breathe. Before I knew it, I'd floated outside—barefoot in a dressing gown, I stared into the sky. Why can't I look in my own husband's eyes like this? Where am I connected to, if it isn't the suburban galaxy I'd inhabited my whole life? As I felt the weight of my belly pull me back down to Earth, I wondered if there was anything I could do to stop her from feeling like that. I don't want her to be an alien like me.

We pull into the driveway. I closed my eyes in the car at some point, so I tentatively open them only to be met with the supernovic glare of the neighbour's Christmas lights. I'm exhausted, all the way down to the marrow in my bones. I only carry a few bags of shopping while Pete takes the rest, and our beloved Nora.

We dump most of the bags by the door and stand in silence for a few seconds. Pete picks up one of the bags, a brown paper one, and hands it to me.

"I know you don't like surprises. I know. But I saw this in a shop, and I just thought you know...early Christmas present."

I open the bag to reveal a few brightly coloured blocks of plasticine. I smile. I've never told him about my obsession with claymation, or about my Last Christmas-related visions. I wonder how he knew.

"I know you like to fidget and all that, and look..." He moves his thumb to underline a word on the packaging.

"Non-toxic." I read "So Nora can fidget too..."

"Am I getting it?" He looks at me with something intangible in his eyes. Hope, love, anticipation, all the stars in the Milky Way. I don't know. It's still hard to hold eye contact for that long.

"I'm really trying to get it."

"Yeah. Thank you." I hug him tightly. "This was a nice surprise."



Marionette

Ishrat Zaman

*"I didn't choose this," they whisper into the unknown.
"The choice was never yours," the unknown whispers back.*

Content warning: abuse

1. The Prince

The royal court teems with vipers.

In the daylight, they hide behind masks of neutrality and geniality. At nightfall, they slink out of their homes to hunt their prey. They camouflage themselves with a circus of good deeds and promises that ooze like honey from their lips. Their pledges of honour and integrity ring robust on the outside, but are tinny and hollow on the inside. The vipers entice the unsuspecting monarch to let his guard down and coax him to surrender his fear for trust.

And as the monarch embraces the vipers as his most loyal subjects, they strike.

The prince stands tall and strong before his court.

He, too, wears a mask. Internally, the panic swelling inside him threatens to crush his lungs. A bead of sweat trickles down his neck, dampening his dress shirt. As he bows before his people, he tucks his hands behind his back to conceal how they tremble.

There is no one to place a soothing balm on the burning terror that races in his mind. Once, long ago, there might have been. He traverses the fragile, precarious bridges of his memory and sees their silhouettes with startling clarity. His parents. His sister and brother. They turn towards him and smile, beckoning him to join them with open arms. His heart races as he tries to draw closer to them. But his limbs are stiff, and before he can even think of moving, they crumble into dust and ashes with agonising screams, and are swept away in the sands of time.

The prince stands alone.

He rises from his bow and his eyes swerve to the side, towards the gleaming object that tempts the ordinary man and fills him with a thirst that rivals a traveller lost in the desert. The crown beckons him. There is no choice but to follow its call. He submits to an unparalleled power as he kneels before the throne.

The vipers watch with impassive faces. Yet, their eyes burn with uncontrollable greed that is as persistent as the tide when the moon is round. Their fangs ache with potent venom that desires to be unleashed, but they suppress their urges. They bide their time, shifting uneasily as their eyes flicker between one another, before turning back to the ceremony.

Firm hands lift the crown and place it atop the prince's dark curls. The crown haloes him, and as he raises his head, the prince moulds himself into a new being, like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis. A new monarch is born.

All hail the king.

2. The Servant

Soak. Scrub. Repeat.

The sponge chafes against her wrinkled fingers as she scrubs the floor, but the serving girl pays no attention to the uncomfortable sensation. She dips the sponge into a metal bucket, wrings it out and casts it onto the floor. As she scrubs, she raises her head to gaze at the queen, who stands by the window.

As discreetly as possible, she eyes the finery the queen has donned with poorly concealed envy. The silk is of the highest quality, patterned with intricately embroidered blossoms and leaves woven out of golden thread. As the queen shifts, the light catches the carefully woven threads, and they glisten in the sun. Her clothes must have cost a fortune. She looks down at her own drab, plain robes, and frowns.

Soak. Scrub. Repeat.

The serving girl dares to raise her gaze up to the queen's face, and nearly swallows her tongue in shock. Illuminated in the morning's glow, the queen's face is etched with despair and anguish. She bites her lips to suppress the bitter laughter that bubbles up her throat unbidden. What must it be like, to have everything one wants at their beck and call, and still be utterly miserable? These royals were damn ungrateful, she thought to herself as she started working on a new patch of tiles.

If she were queen, she would do better.

A vision rapidly blooms in her mind's eye — her, dressed from head to foot in the most exquisite fabrics that flow like rivers down the line of her body, a decadent crown dripping with jewels perched on top of her petite head. What would it be like, to break from the cycle that condemned her to wipe the floors day in and day out, and seek out a better life? She couldn't imagine anything else she would rather want.

It would be simple, too. A dash of poison in one's dinner was a very common affair in the palace. It would only be a matter of pulling some strings to get where she wanted. The serving girl's eyes wandered around and settled on a goblet the queen was holding. She smiled.

A cold hand grasped her neck and forced it downwards towards the floor.

"Keep your head down and pay attention to what you're doing," snarled the housekeeper.

Perhaps another day. Managing to sneak away from the housekeeper for a few hours was a royal privilege, anyways.

Soak. Scrub. Repeat.

3. The Joker

Smile and play the fool. Do not disappoint them.

He backflips three times in a row and lands perfectly, grinning while the noblemen let out deafening roars at the feat and the women gasp, gazing at him in admiration. Turning towards the royal throne, he tiptoes towards the queen and bows before her while the crowd clamours. As he rises, he looks up at her, and reels back in surprise, eyes round and hands splayed out towards her. The queen looks to him with questioning eyes. Exactly the response he wants.

He draws closer to her and pulls out a small bouquet of flowers from behind her ear. The queen gasps with amazement. He hands the bouquet to her and bows again, leaving her with a beautiful mess of peonies, gerberas, and delphiniums. She smiles and caresses the tip of a silky petal with the tip of her finger, before looking up at him with a radiant beam adorning her face. Ah, so easily impressed! Beside her, the king smiles, but lays a possessive hand on her wrist.

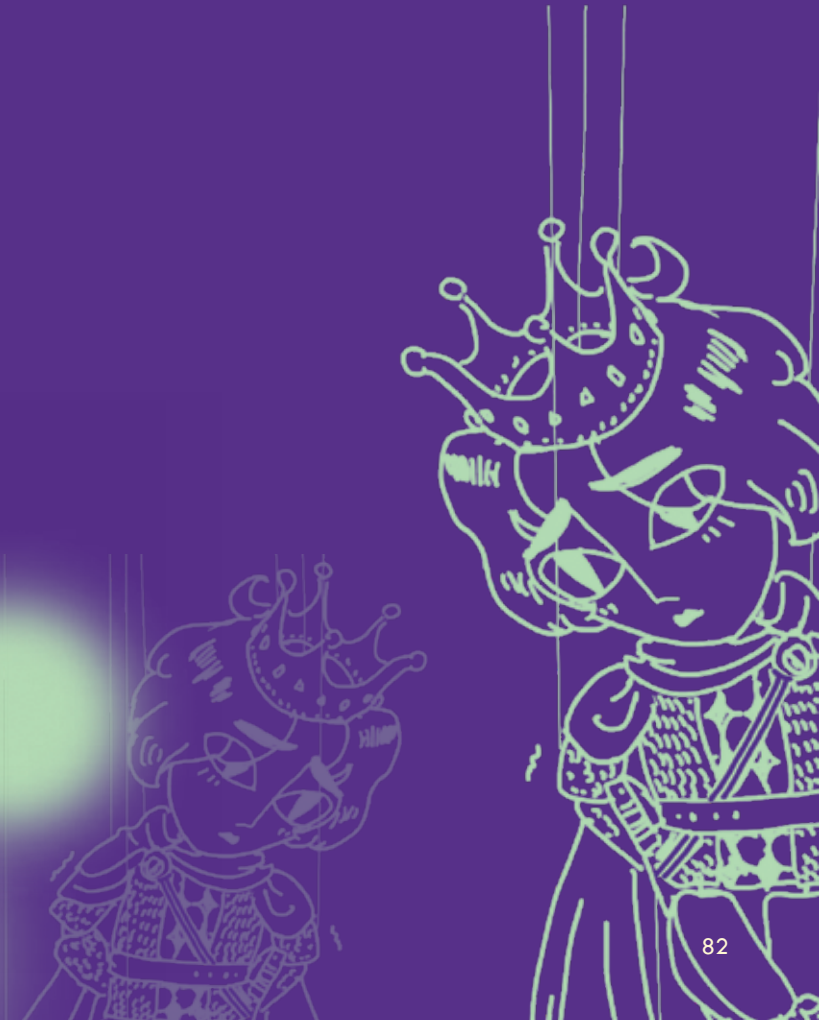
Continue your show.

The joker turns away and sits upon a padded stool. He grabs a cello by his side and taps his chin thoughtfully, musing on what to perform. The royal court watches with enthusiasm.

As he looks at their bright faces in turn, the light feeling in his stomach dissipates. Here they were, all the noblemen and noblewomen, frolicking away while platters of food pour from the kitchens like a veritable cornucopia. While they made merry with entertainment and wine, they cast no thought for the fragile world that lay outside the walls of the palace. Did one even exist? Was there even a place for the people who starved and slaved away in the minds of the gentry?

He fingers the strings of his cello. What he would do, to be the mirror to show these people their true reflection. Not even the aroma of fresh flowers could mask the stench of rot permeating the palace. Proving to them that their beauty and benevolence was cheaper than grain sold at the marketplace would be the sweetest glory. The words, dark and bitter, linger on his tongue like poison.

He swallows them down and smiles at his audience. He would bide his time. A revolution is on the move.



Banjo Saturday

Fergus Clarkson

The ember-eyed pilgrim
Singing smoke dirges
Sits smouldering under
Darkened, desolate skies.

The trembling lips
Of an adulterous lake
Swell under his view,
Peeled apart in night sweats
Like unsettled lovers,
Staining the sky with kisses
Of nervous disgrace.

Through frosted blind windows
The lake stares back in shame,
Quivering below the bitter air
That winnows the walls
Of downspout Kosciusko.

Its stress trembles off the
Taut, tortured violin wail
Of its ripples tugging on
Worried bowstring winds.

The pilgrim watches as
Strands of tension travel
The wet-telegraph
Down to distant shores,
Where dreaming heads
Receive Morse code
Through water-woven blankets
And wake up restless.

Yet this oppressive tensivity,
Stained with human humour,
Was not dreamt up in gales
Nor in the heave of eventide;
With wild hands the pilgrim
Pulls at plastic shallows,
His queer heart thumping
Indecisive rhythms
Across the batter head
Of surface cellophane.

Stillborn fingertips
Reach from wrists
In flailing depth,
Straining the Saran diaphragm
Like the flow at Island Bend,
Grinding their knuckles
Against the refracted sky.

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